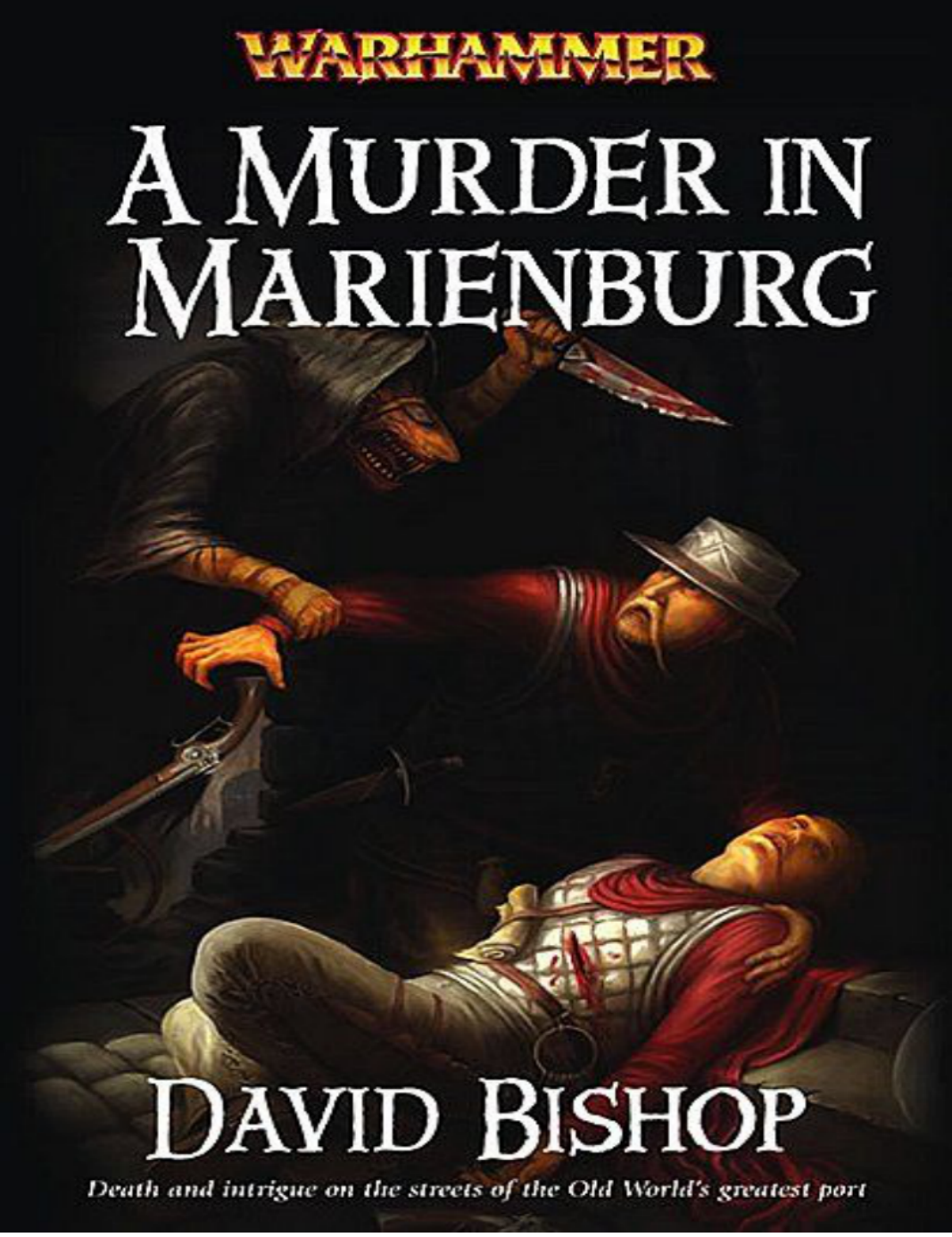
WARHAMMER

A MURDER IN MARIENBURG



DAVID BISHOP

Death and intrigue on the streets of the Old World's greatest port

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

- David Bishop
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David Bishop

A murder in Marienburg

This is a dark age, a bloody age, an age of daemons and of sorcery. It is an age of battle and death, and of the world's ending. Amidst all of the fire, flame and fury it is a time, too, of mighty heroes, of bold deeds and great courage. At the heart of the Old World sprawls the Empire, the largest and most powerful of the human realms. Known for its engineers, sorcerers, traders and soldiers, it is a land of great mountains, mighty rivers, dark forests and vast cities. And from his throne in Altdorf reigns the Emperor Karl-Franz, sacred descendant of the founder of these lands, Sigmar, and wielder of his magical warhammer. But these are far from civilised times. Across the length and breadth of the Old World, from the knightly palaces of Bretonnia to ice-bound Kislev in the far north, come rumblings of war. In the towering World's Edge Mountains, the orc tribes are gathering for another assault. Bandits and renegades harry the wild southern lands of the Border Princes. There are rumours of rat-things, the skaven, emerging from the sewers and swamps across the land. And from the northern wildernesses there is the ever-present threat of Chaos, of daemons and beastmen corrupted by the foul powers of the Dark Gods. As the time of battle draws ever near, the Empire needs heroes like never before.

CHAPTER ONE

Arullen Silvermoon always knew he was fated to die in Marienburg, but not like this: being stalked by ravening creatures through the dark, dank catacombs beneath Suiddock, every attempt at escape or evasion tracked and checked with effortless ease, all hope extinguished as the creeping shadows drew ever closer. The tall, willowy elf could smell nothing but their foetid, foul stench, the rancorous pungency choking his delicate nostrils and violating his lungs. In all his days Arullen had breathed only two kinds of air-the sandalwood and jasmine scented halls of his warm, welcoming abode in the Sith Rionnasc'namishathir, and the brisk, briny breezes of sea air that gusted across the city's elf quarter.

Now he gagged on the odour of raw effluent and rotting, rancid decay-the stench of men, bitter as the metallic taste of adrenaline at the back of his throat. A greasy yellow mist choked the air in these stone tunnels, so acrid it burnt his eyes. When the vicious aroma became too much, Arullen clamped a hand across his face, pinching his nostrils shut between thumb and forefinger, forcing himself to breathe solely through his mouth. If he had to die down here, let it be in battle, taking some of his unseen enemy with him. There was some honour in that at least. There was no honour to be had in choking to death on the fumes of a city's excreta. He staggered on, the thigh-deep waters sapping the strength from his legs.

Arullen emerged from one tunnel into a circular chamber. Five more tunnels radiated off this space, like the spokes of a wooden cart. The elf looked up, more in hope than expectation of seeing the sky overhead. Instead there was a canopy of bones and tattered scraps of skin, the edges ragged from who knew what. Arullen peered at the collation of horrors. The bones were all shapes and sizes-some so small they must be from children or halflings, others torn from the skeletons of animals or sea creatures.

Most had been picked clean, no flesh left on them. A few had been broken and the marrow extracted from inside. A sickly green light bathed the terrifying tableau. Arullen realised the illumination was born of a thousand tiny glows, each moving and shifting across the underside of the canopy. Light worms, feeding on the last remnants of flesh and blood, using the nutrients to warm their glowing forms.

Suddenly an unholy, inhuman cry rent the vile air, a nasal bellow of hatred and hunger. It echoed around Arullen, bouncing back and forth along the circular tunnels. The elf's fingers tightened round the hilt of his dagger. His other weapons had been torn from his grasp in

that first, terrible battle after he had stumbled into the creatures' lair. Six of them had fallen in a brief, flailing skirmish, four struck down by arrows while the other two had their heads cleaved by his long blade. What Arullen wouldn't give to have those weapons still in his possession. With them to hand he might have survived this night, turned adversity into triumph. Instead he found himself running through the shadows, searching only for the chance to see moonlight again. Let that fall upon his face and courage would surely return, reborn by his lunar namesake, but the crescent moon had not yet risen. As echoes faded away, Arullen offered up a prayer asking for salvation, however unlikely it might be. At least don't let my death be in vain, he added.

The answer was swift and merciless. When the echoes of that inhuman cry fell silent at last, they were replaced by the skittering of nail on stone, and the sounds of approach coming from ahead and behind. Arullen realised the unholy bellow was a summoning. They had found him and now they were closing in for the kill. The young elf looked at the dagger clutched in his hand. The blade was still clean, untouched by blood of any kind-but not for much longer.

"I can lead you to salvation," a hoarse voice hissed from the darkness.

Arullen spun round, blade drawn back, ready to deliver a killing blow. His eyes searched the dark tunnels around him but saw nothing in the inky blackness. "Who spoke? Show yourself!"

"I spoke," the voice replied. Arullen turned to see a shuffling figure emerge from the shadows. It had the shape of a man, but its features were warped and twisted. Whatever other horrors tormented the creature's body remained hidden behind a damp, black shroud. "I offer salvation. Will you accept it?"

"Can you get me out of here safely?" Arullen asked, keeping his dagger raised and ready to strike.

"Accept salvation and you shall never know pain or fear again."

The skittering sound was getting louder, the hunters ever closer. Arullen struggled to discern which of the tunnels the noise was coming from, but the walls and rising waters created echo upon echo. He closed his eyes and concentrated, tilting his head down to single out the source. His senses reached out into the darkness, probing and pawing at the black. No, the monsters were not coming from a single direction-they were coming from all of them. He was trapped, surrounded by the advancing horde. When he opened his eyes once more, the mysterious stranger was still waiting for an answer. "Well?"

"I accept salvation," Arullen replied. What choice did he have? He was as good as dancing with Isha now, but perhaps there was still some hope.

The stranger's face contorted, ruptured lips twisted into a chilling resemblance of a smile. "That is good. Follow me and all will be well for you. You have my word on it." The hunched figure shuffled away into the nearest tunnel entrance, heading directly towards where the skittering sound was loudest.

"You can't go that way," the elf hissed. "That's where-"

The stranger paused, not bothering to look back. "Follow me now, or you shall surely die." Kurt Schnell had few illusions about what was used to make the sausages served in the Seagull and Spittoon. Two previous owners of the tavern were serving time on Rijker's Isle for their culinary crimes. Well, that wasn't strictly accurate, Kurt reminded himself-both men had admitted charges of murder. The fact they chose to turn choice cuts of their victims into stuffing for sausages had added a grisly notoriety to the menu at the Seagull and Spittoon. The new owner, an impish Bretonnian called Jacques Pottage with an overbearing fondness for garlic, garlic and more garlic, had to withstand weekly inspections of his kitchens to make certain lightning did not strike thrice. But that didn't stop him building a lucrative trade from specialising in exotically named, spiced and priced links of offal forced into animal gut casings.

As watch sergeant for the eastern end of Goudberg, Kurt was tasked with carrying out these weekly inspections. Once satisfied with the results, he was routinely offered his choice of mains from the menu for free. He always insisted on paying, all too mindful of the slippery slope that started with taking the occasional backhander. His men had grumbled about being forbidden to accept such gratuities at first, but soon learned to live with it or move on to other, less honest postings. As a consequence, this part of Goudberg enjoyed one of the lowest crime rates in Marienburg.

The fact there was little worth stealing in Goudberg didn't hurt either, but Kurt had long since learned to take his triumphs where he could get them. Life had a habit of kicking you in the jewels when you least expected, so it was better to enjoy success when it was available. He smiled as the tavern's buxom serving wench approached, her ample dйcolletage drawing admiring glances from all the other men in the Seagull and Spittoon.

"So, Inga, what's the special of the day?" Kurt asked. "Dumplings, by any chance?"

The blonde woman blushed and giggled, shaking her head at his comment. "You shouldn't ask such things, Sergeant Schnell," she replied, placing a tankard of foaming ale in front of him on the rough-hewn wooden table. "It will only get you in trouble at your new station."

"My new station?" Kurt forced himself to nod, as if he knew what

she was talking about. The promotion he had been pushing for the last six months had finally been approved, it seemed. But, as always in Marienburg, gossip moved far faster than bureaucracy. If you wanted to know what was happening on the narrow streets and numerous canals of this city, make for the nearest tavern and open your ears-that was what Kurt's first sergeant had once told him. It was as true now as it had been then, if not more so. "You're quite right, Inga. I'll have to watch my back where I'm going." He waited, but the well-rounded woman merely nodded her agreement, offering no more clues to what she knew. Kurt sighed and took off his black cap, the headgear that gave the Watch its nickname. "So, what is the special of the day-cormorant and coriander? Marsh-pig and mustard cress? Rat and radish?"

Inga shook her head, grinning playfully. "Meat and turnip sausage surprise."

"What meat?" Kurt wondered, but held up a hand to stop her saying the inevitable reply. "Don't tell me-it's a surprise, right?"

"How did you guess?" Inga asked sulkily, having been denied her fun for the night.

"I've been inspecting the kitchen," he said. "Trust me, there are no surprises on your menu." Kurt squinted to see through the tavern's obligatory pall of pipe smoke so he could read the choices crudely chalked up on a stone wall behind the bar. "I'll have the… garlic and garamond."

"Garlic and gammon," Inga corrected him.

"Even better," Kurt agreed.

"Chipped, mashed or boiled vegetables?"

"Mashed."

"And for dessert?"

Kurt shook his head. "Last time I ate here I was peppering the privy for three days afterwards. Let's see if I can stomach the sausages first, before getting courageous enough to order a second course."

"Very wise," she said. "I'll be back in a few minutes." The serving wench sashayed to the kitchen, pausing to slap the face of a halfling that tried to look up her soot-smeared skirt.

Kurt sipped his ale, savouring the belligerent flavours of hops and honey while his eyes scanned the other drinkers. Most were familiar faces: stevedores from Suiddock who made enough from their daily toil on the docks to live on a less violent and dangerous isle of Marienburg; weary travelling merchants tired from a hard day traipsing up and down the city's narrow, tortuous alleys and passageways; a cluster of half-cut halflings looking to cause trouble with anyone who caught their eyes; and a solitary figure in the far corner, draped in a dark cloak with the hood up to hide their features,

using the shadows as a disguise. That one needed watching, Kurt had little doubt about it. He'd been in more than his share of bar brawls and fought on far too many blood-soaked battlefields not to recognise trouble when he saw it. Kurt let his spare hand slide nonchalantly across to the heavy club secured by a leather strap at his waist. The threat of violence hung in the air, vicious and angry, like a thunderstorm rolling in from the sea. The only question was whether he'd get the chance to eat his meal before something ignited the festering rage in the tavern. The stranger led Arullen through a bewildering maze of tunnels and passages, some so narrow the elf was forced to turn sideways before edging himself into the claustrophobically-tight gaps. Each forward step in the foetid, deepening waters was harder than the last. The tide must be coming in, Arullen realised- I've been underground so long I've lost track of time. Meanwhile, the sound of skittering grew louder as those hunting the elf got closer. Their stench got stronger too, funnelling ahead of them like the spray from a mighty wave. Finally, the noise and the rancid odour were too much for Arullen. He turned back to face the oncoming horde, his dagger held tautly in a clenched fist.

Arullen could see movement in the dark, shapes racing ever closer, tiny glimpses of their faces chilling the blood in his veins. "They're coming," he hissed to the stranger. "It's too late, they're coming!"

Then he was wrenched sideways, his skull smashing against the corner of a stone passageway. Grasping fingers pulled him into a gap so narrow, it tore the fabric of his tunic both front and back. Still the stranger's hands pawed at Arullen, ripping his garments, jagged fingernails slicing at skin, piercing flesh and scraping across bone. The elf looked at his hands and realised the dagger was gone. He was without any weapon to claim the enemy before it claimed him. It was over, Arullen thought.

A torrent of hunters surged past the end of the passageway, racing forwards down the tunnel in which the elf had been standing mere moments before. On and on the wave of ravenous creatures went, dozens upon dozens of them, whispering to each other in some hideous, guttural tongue of their own devising, rage glinting across their black, pitiless eyes. Arullen listened as they passed, counting the horde. More than a hundred of them had passed before the surge slowed. A hundred more passed in the minute that followed. Finally, the last of them went on its way, limping as it staggered by, the weakest of the pack.

Arullen held his breath as it went by, willing himself to be silent as the grave. Only when the skittering had become inaudible did he open his eyes. "This way to salvation," the stranger said. "Come, they

will realise their mistake soon and return. We don't have long to reach safety." Arullen let his guide drag him further along the passageway, its walls getting ever closer to each other. Just when it felt he could go no further, the passageway abruptly opened out into another underground chamber-and this one had a tiny, barred window set into its roof, allowing a glimpse of the night sky. The elf looked up and felt the sickle moon bathe his face with its reflected glory.

"Thank you," Arullen said, turning to look at his saviour.

The stranger held up the elf's lost dagger. "Mine?"

"Yours," Arullen agreed, "if you get me out of here alive."

The stranger's face fell. "Mine!" It stabbed the dagger deep into Arullen's abdomen before twisting the blade inside the wound. The stranger ripped the weapon back out of the elf's body and licked the blade clean, a trickle of blood escaping his suppurating tongue, dripping onto his shroud.

Arullen sank to one knee, his hands trying to hold the wound closed without success. The stranger slashed at those hands, slicing them open and forcing them away from the gaping, jagged hole. Arullen slumped backwards against the slime-covered wall, his breath coming in quick gasps. The stranger moved closer and dipped knotted fingers into the wound, squirming them around inside the flaps of skin, bathing them in the elf's blood. When the hands came away, they left with a sucking sound and something tumbled out with them, splashing in the water as it fell from Arullen's body.

He watched disbelievingly as the stranger raised his bloody hands and offered the crimson digits to the moonlight, accompanied by a hysterical voice babbling an incantation, words jumbled into each other, without meaning or sense. The stranger stopped and listened, as if expecting the sickle moon to reply. Apparently satisfied, he shuffled over to a stone column that ran the height of the chamber. The stranger slapped his bloody hands on the column repeatedly, like so much meat on a butcher's slab, again accompanied by the nonsensical ranting. When the stranger took his hands away, Arullen could have sworn he saw blood being absorbed into the stone structure, as if it were drinking the crimson smearings.

"I was monarch of this place once," the stranger muttered. "This was my realm, my domain-until the madness claimed me, the anarchy brought revolution to my flesh and my soul."

"King of the catacombs, were you?" Arullen gasped, trying to keep the bitterness from his voice. "Sovereign of the sewers, lord of the longdrops?"

"Not down here, foolish elf." A misshapen finger jabbed towards the moon beyond the metal bars high overhead. "Up there! That was my world, my place-my home."

Finding previously unknown reserves of strength, Arullen hurled himself across the chamber. He shoved the stranger down into the soup of sewage and seawater, forcing their pustule-pocked face beneath the surface, savouring the thrashing of the other's limbs. "You've killed me," the elf snarled. "Now it's my turn!" He held the stranger down for what felt like forever, waiting until long after the thrashing had stopped. Finally, he staggered backwards, panting and breathless, all too aware of his own life seeping away from the wound at his waist. A wave of dizziness overtook him and Arullen stretched out an arm to the wall for support, his bloody hand resting against the stone column.

It sucked at his skin like an infant at a nipple, guzzling the blood from his palms, hungry for more. The wounded, dying elf managed to tear his arm away, cursing his own forgetfulness. Whatever horror was beyond that column, he had no wish to feed it further. Arullen's only thought now was of finding the surface, warning others about what he had witnessed down here in this watery torment. He glanced about and chose an archway leading off into darkness. Going back the way he'd come through the narrow passageway was no longer a choice. That path had been hard enough when he was unhurt, but he would certainly die now if he attempted to retrace his steps. Arullen did not savour the prospect of spending eternity with his bones wedged between the walls, until they were finally washed out to sea. "Archway it is," the elf winced and staggered in that direction. "I'm only going to ask this once," Kurt announced, making sure he projected his authoritative voice so it reached all those still conscious inside the Seagull and Spittoon. "Who tossed the first halfling?" The brawl had been inevitable. Unfortunately, it broke out just as Inga was bringing Kurt his meat and turnip sausage surprise. The serving wench was giving the watch sergeant her best come-to-bed smile, but she often did that on Aubentag. Her husband was usually away from home on the second day of the week making deliveries to the inmates and warders out on Rijker's Isle. That left his wife alone-and Inga was notorious for liking a warm bed. Kurt had carefully avoided her advances in the past and certainly had no intention of succumbing to her wanton charms tonight. All he wanted was something to eat, perhaps another tankard of ale and a quiet night's rest in his own bed-without Inga for company.

What he got was a tavern brawl of such brutality and vigour only four people were still standing by the finish, and two of them were halflings. The other two were the brooding figure from the corner and, naturally, Kurt. The fighting had started when somebody decided to engage in a little recreational dwarf-tossing. Since there were no dwarfs to hand, one of the half-cut halflings was press ganged into

service, flying gracelessly through the air before landing face-first between Inga's considerable breasts.

This had sent Kurt's meal into the air, but on a considerably shorter journey. Both uneaten sausages landed neatly in the tankards of two burly stevedores, who took no end of offence at having their precious ale sullied. From there it took mere moments for the chaos to quickly become a particularly violent brand of mayhem. Kurt watched wistfully as fists connected with faces, boots battered bodies and benches became battering rams. He did his best to stay out of the carnage, until one of the stevedores decided to pick on someone his own size after drop-kicking a halfling into the ceiling.

"You!" snarled the drunken stevedore, managing to slur even this single syllable. "You're the one whose sausage-"

Kurt silenced the accusation by bludgeoning the burly bruiser. For a mountain of a man used to shifting weights that could cripple most beasts of burden, the stevedore was not much of a fighter and went down in an untidy pile of limbs. His drinking companions did not take kindly to this and backed Kurt into a corner, four of them forming a semi-circle around him. The watch sergeant retrieved his black cap from inside his waist belt and held it up for them to see. "I'm a duly appointed representative of the law in this city. It is my job to keep the peace. If you attempt to do me harm-"

But the warning went unheeded, as the nearest stevedore lunged at him. Kurt swayed aside from the attack, letting the charging figure run headfirst into a solid stone wall. One down, three to go. The next came straight at Kurt, arms thrown out sideways to ensure he'd got some kind of grip on the watch sergeant. Kurt smacked his club against the attacker's right cheek, the lump of lead inside the bludgeon shattering bone and bringing a howl of dismayed pain.

Two down, two to go. These stood at either side of Kurt, watching him warily, looking for an opening. They'd seen him deal with their brethren one on one, but surely a dual attack would win? They nodded to each other and charged, not noticing the overhead beam that ran diagonally from one wall to the other. Kurt sprang into the air, tucking his long legs up underneath him to avoid the attack. The stevedores collided head-first with each other. The almighty crack of their skulls was followed by the duller sound of them slumping to the damp, beer-stained floor.

Kurt swung his legs back and forth twice to gain some momentum before letting go of the overhead beam. He landed nimbly on his feet beyond the three unconscious men and their whimpering companion, who was too busy nursing his shattered face to attempt another attack. The rest of the brawlers had gone down fighting by this time, either unconscious or groaning in pain, leaving only two halflings and

the brooding figure in the corner. Inga was beneath one of the tavern's tables, although her groans had nothing to do with pain, judging by their frequency and the presence of the Seagull and Spittoon's owner underneath her. "Inga, for the love of Manann, keep it down!" Kurt yelled, before repeating his question about the halfling-tossing incident that had started the trouble.

"I think it was one of the fools who knocked themselves unconscious trying to hurt you," the figure from the corner replied, emerging from the shadows. Kurt was surprised by the softness of the voice, and even more surprised when the hood was drawn back to reveal a beautiful young woman. Her chestnut-brown hair cascaded down to surround heart-shaped features, while warm eyes glittered excitedly at him. "Probably the one whose head is still embedded in that stone wall."

"Good," Kurt said. "The pain he'll be feeling when he wakes in the morning might persuade him to think first before he hurls halflings next time." Kurt surveyed the rest of the broken and bleeding bodies strewn about the tavern. "I notice you stayed out of the fighting."

"I'm only here to deliver a message."

"A message-who for?"

"You," she replied, a smile playing about her lips. "I take it you are Kurt Schnell, watch sergeant for this area of the Goudberg?"

"You take it correctly. What's the message?"

"You're to report to the commander's office at dawn, where you'll be given a new assignment-and before you ask, I don't know the details. I'm supposed to report back with my perceptions of you. Is there anything you'd like me to tell him?"

"The truth will do," Kurt said, not interested in playing games or politics with this emissary.

She tilted her head to one side slightly. "Do you always trade in the truth?"

"I find it the easiest thing to remember. Lies require more effort."

She nodded her agreement before turning away, her black cloak cutting an arc through the air. As she reached the outer door of the tavern, the woman paused to glance over her shoulder at Kurt. "My name's Belladonna Speer, by the way. I suspect we'll be seeing more of each other, Sergeant Schnell." With that she was gone, vanishing into the dark night outside.

Inga reappeared from beneath the table where she'd avoided the melee. "Is it over yet?"

Kurt couldn't suppress a smile. "I suspect the fun's just getting started." Arullen staggered through the darkness, not knowing where he was headed or how he kept going. His fingers had gone numb and

his legs felt like stone, too heavy to lift out of the foul liquid that had now reached waist height in the catacombs. Still he trudged onwards, one hand clenched around the wound in his abdomen, while his other hand clawed him along the circular, slime-covered walls. He should be dead by now, Arullen was certain of that, but something kept him going kept drawing him forwards. The elf did not want to perish in this hole, carrion for vermin and other dark denizens of the sewers. He had come down into the catacombs with three of his brethren, lured here by tales of rare artefacts to be found in these misbegotten tunnels and chambers. According to the myths, an elf vessel had once crashed against the rocks of Riddra and spilled a cargo of the finest jewellery into these waters. Part of the haul had been recovered, but the rest was taken by the tide. If you believed the legends, much of the cargo had been washed into the catacombs by the same storm tides that had caused the ship's demise. It had lain below ground for generation upon generation, waiting for elves brave enough and bold enough to venture into the catacombs and reclaim the cargo, to take it back to the elf quarter.

Arullen had persuaded three of his brethren to venture into the catacombs with him, but their quest had been foolish and tragic, not brave and bold. The others were dead, torn apart by those ravening monsters and all Arullen had to show for it was a single silver brooch, found when his hands brushed across it in the darkness. He pulled the brooch from inside his bloodied garb and stared at the fragment of stone set in the jewellery. A speck of light glimmered within the unpolished stone, whispering dark thoughts into Arullen's mind, urging him to go back and surrender to those that stalked him. No, I won't do that, he decided, hiding the brooch away from his gaze once more. I must get to the surface. Let me die with the moon's light on my face and I could still die contented, he thought.

There was another reason to keep going: he had to warn his brethren, tell them of the coming cataclysm. Unless the alarm was raised, what lurked down here in the darkness would overwhelm all of Marienburg. It would make no distinction between elf and man, halfling or dwarf. And if Marienburg fell to these nightmares, it could loose an aeon of Chaos and unimaginable horror upon the Old World. The Empire was still embattled by the legacy of its war against Chaos, it could not withstand another war so soon. Arullen knew he would not survive long now, but he could still forewarn the city's inhabitants and they could forearm themselves against the coming terror. He owed his fallen brethren that much. So he staggered on, his long, delicate features drenched in sweat, bleached white by fear and pain.

A deep, jagged pain sliced through his body, bringing an involuntary cry of anguish from his lips. He stopped and leant his

back against the curving wall, closing his eyes against the hurt. Something sharp was inside the wound, nagging at his intestines, slowly rending them apart. The tip of his dagger must have broken against a bone within him. Now it was making for the heart, working its way upwards to finish the job of killing him.

How ironic, the enchantment laid on his blade to make sure the dagger always claimed its target was now claiming his life. Arullen's mother had always said meddling with magic would be the death of him. As always, fate was proving her right. But this was no time for self-pity.

Arullen opened his eyes once more and gasped. The tunnel was lighter than it had been before, illumination spilling along the shaft from a curve ahead of the elf. He stopped and listened for any hint of the hunters that had stalked him down here, but there was only the sound of liquid lapping at the walls. Arullen forced himself towards the bend in the tunnel and the light beyond. Perhaps it was merely caused by another cluster of flesh-eating glow worms, but it gave him a reason to go on. The elf laughed out loud when he came round the curve and saw the true cause. A narrow, stone staircase wound its way upwards from the catacombs. The light was pouring down from the top of the steps, along with the first clean air Arullen had smelled for hours. He'd made it, against all odds he had found a way out of this maze.

Had he been able, the elf would have run to the staircase. Instead he staggered, gasping for breath, every step driving the dagger's tip closer to his heart. Arullen reached the steps and grabbed hold of the ancient metal railing that led up and around to the surface. "Help…" he cried out, but his voice was feeble and weak. "Please, somebody-help me…" But nobody heard, nobody came to his aid. So the dying elf dragged himself up the steps, one at a time, crawling towards freedom. The occasional glimpses of moonlight kept him going, urging him upwards, beckoning him to its embrace.

He emerged on a narrow ledge, jutting out over a narrow side canal. Arullen knew not where he was within Marienburg, and he no longer cared. He had escaped the torments underground and that was all that mattered. The elf edged his way along the ledge to a wider path. He could see nobody on the path but that would not be the case for long. Marienburg rarely slept, the pulsing heart of its merchant economy requiring constant attention and forward momentum to sustain itself. Arullen paused, looking in either direction for somebody, anybody to aid him. His family would pay a handsome reward to those who saved their son, he was certain of that.

Heavy footsteps strode towards him from behind. At last, Arullen thought, relief surging through him. He turned to face the

approaching figures, smiling at them weakly. “Please, I need help…” he began. Then his eyes saw the long, green-stained blades being drawn and the murderous, malevolent glint in their eyes. He hadn’t escaped after all. They had come up here after him, and now they were going to finish the job that warped stranger had started. Whatever happened, they must not discover the brooch on his body. He staggered backwards, flailing one arm at the approaching enemy to distract them while his other hand retrieved the brooch from inside his garb. Once it was in his grasp, he let it drop into the shadows before running at the dark, foreboding figure ahead of him. “The sons of the House of Silvermoon do not fall easily, monster!” he snarled. “Your death shall be my legacy!” A howl of animalistic pain and suffering echoed briefly along the Three Penny Bridge, but nobody reacted, nobody came running to see what was happening or what help they could offer the suffering soul. This was not that sort of place. In much of Marienburg a cry in the night brought neighbours and concern. Along the Three Penny Bridge and the stone-cobbled streets that approached it, nobody listened and fewer cared. No shutters opened to see what was happening, nobody lifted a finger to help Arullen Silvermoon as he died. Of all the areas in this maritime metropolis, he had inadvertently chosen exactly the wrong district in which to be murdered. The rule of law had no meaning near the Three Penny Bridge.

CHAPTER TWO

Belladonna Speer had always possessed a fascination for corpses. Not so much the corpses themselves, more for deducing why they had become corpses. What turned a living, breathing person into an empty, barren husk? Where did their spirit, their essence go once they were dead? And how had that spirit been driven from their body? Most of all, she enjoyed the puzzle of solving these riddles, even though she knew many of them were enigmas no mortal could hope to explain or understand. Belladonna had seen her first corpse at the tender age of seven, when she found her mother's father dead outside the family home in Guilderveld. Other children would have been traumatised, horrified, emotionally scarred for life. Belladonna was simply intrigued: why had her grandfather died, and what had killed him? The Black Caps had glanced at the wrinkled, wizened corpse and immediately announced anyone who lived long enough to see their seventh decade must have died of old age.

A priest of Morr was called to deal with the body, prior to Ruben Speer taking his place at the family mausoleum in Doodkanaal. Belladonna had watched the priest from her window as he anointed the body with various unguents and potions. The bald-headed holy man noticed her interest and invited the girl to come down. "You do not fear me?" he had asked, a wry smile at the corner of his pale, grey eyes.

"Why should I?"

"Many associate us with their own, inevitable mortality. Few wish to be near us, yet you display no such fear. Are you accustomed to death, my child?"

Belladonna shook her head. "I'd never seen a body before today. But everybody dies, don't they?"

"Yes."

"So what is there to be afraid of?" She had smiled, satisfied by her childish logic. It was Belladonna who noticed the scent of almonds on her grandfather's breath when the priest accidentally leaned on the dead man's chest. When she pointed this out to him, he repeated the motion and was rewarded with another waft of almond-tinged air escaping the corpse's nostrils.

"Poison," the priest whispered to himself, more a statement of fact than a question. He paused in his ministrations to study the corpse's pupils and gums. He lifted up the fingers of both hands and sniffed at them. But it was Belladonna who found the abandoned hipflask, a trickle of almond-scented alcohol still inside it. She was about to taste the liquid for herself until the priest slapped it from her

grasp. “Don’t!” He retrieved the flask and again sniffed at it. “Definitely poison-possibly from Araby.” Another deep breath. “Is your grandfather a merchant?”

“Yes. He deals with Araby all the time,” Belladonna said. “But one of the other merchants, Clements, wants my grandfather to retire and sell the business to him.” When the priest raised an eyebrow at this information coming from a young girl, Belladonna smiled sweetly. “I heard my grandfather arguing with Clements outside my window last night. Their shouting woke me up. Clements said he couldn’t wait any longer for my grandfather to retire from the business, he would have to take drastic action.” She looked at the lifeless remnants of her grandfather. “I’d never heard those words before, that’s why they stuck in my head. Is this what drastic action looks like? Did Clements poison my grandfather?”

“Yes, my child-I’m afraid he may have done. But you must not speak of this to anyone, do you understand?” the priest asked. “If Clements knows we suspect him, he will flee the city-or worse.”

So began Belladonna’s fascination for corpses and how they had died. Clements had confessed when confronted by Black Caps and was taken to the prison on Rijker’s Isle, where he died in a brawl. Belladonna would have liked to see his body, to study the clues it offered-but girls didn’t do such things.

There were no words to describe her talent for seeing what others did not. It was more than mere instinct or intuition. She could look at a body and instantly know what had happened to it, where others only saw grief or pain. As the years passed, the priest of Morr let her observe his duties, learning from him the many ways of slaying a person. Belladonna’s interest lay more with the methods of murder than the corpses left behind. As a woman she could never become a priest of Morr, but she had little wish to spend a lifetime in drab clerical robes that frightened everyone else away. She loved life too much to lock herself away in a temple or a mausoleum for the rest of her days.

Of course, her fascination with killings and manslaughter did not go well with her family. Young women from wealthy merchant families were usually destined for a choice from three roles in life: wife, mother or mistress. Some managed to pursue all three activities with equal vigour, but most kept themselves to one or two of these choices.

Belladonna’s four sisters were not her equal in intelligence or guile, even if you combined their collective wits and wisdom, but they were the apples of their parents’ eyes. By comparison, she was a troublesome child, a worrisome young lady and, finally, a woman of uncommon beauty who refused to abide by social conventions. Not for

her a lifetime of flower arranging and child rearing. Instead Belladonna had horrified the rest of the Speer family by joining the Black Caps on her twenty-first birthday. She hadn't been home since, except for her father's funeral the previous winter. In a city where women were expected to be wives or whores-and sometimes both-Belladonna Speer was busy creating a new destiny, reinventing herself afresh.

Well, that was the theory. In fact she had spent the past three years working as a messenger and private secretary for the commander. She was his eyes and ears on the streets of Marienburg, reporting back to him any and all observations made during her travels. Yes, it was intriguing to be sent into the worst hives of scum and villainy, knowing the commander's armband guaranteed her safe passage.

Belladonna had seen things few other women ever witnessed, and that had satisfied her innate curiosity for a while. But now her patience was wearing thin. She had learned all she could from these occasional excursions on errands for the commander. Now she wanted to put her theories and observations into practice, out on the streets and canals of this magnificent city. The problem was convincing the commander to forgo her.

The chiming of the dawn gong shook Belladonna from her musings. She was already up and dressed, standing by the single window of her private room in City Watch headquarters. The chamber was no larger than a monastic cell and as sparsely furnished, a stack of leather-bound journals the only truly personal possession. Belladonna made a mental note to come back here and collect the journals after seeing the commander. They contained observations and notes gathered over more than a dozen years, the fruits of her labours to learn all she could about the many methods of administering murder.

In truth, the contents were as familiar to her as the city itself, but the journals were a comfort against doubt. If all went according to plan, those volumes would have a new home before the end of the day. She strode from the room, not bothering to look back. When you possessed a fascination for corpses and how they came to be dead, the luxuries of the living held little interest anymore. Kurt was waiting outside the Watch Commander's antechamber when the dawn gong sounded. The sound boomed along the long, empty corridor, sustained by the high, vaulted ceiling and walls of stone. The headquarters of the City Watch was a grand, spacious building in stark contrast to the places where lowly watchmen worked. Most stations were humble buildings in obscure corners of the city, often sited in converted homes or warehouses that had been seized from lawbreakers as part of their punishment.

Space was always at a premium in Marienburg, little surprise in a city constructed atop a collection of islands across the outlet where the Reik met the sea. Homes and businesses grew ever upwards, upper stories wider than those at street level, looming above the canals and cobbled passageways. The sun's rays never touched some streets, so they never dried, and those condemned to ground floor rooms suffered a lifetime of colds and chest infections, their clothes and homes perpetually damp.

By contrast, the headquarters building was warm and dry, sunshine filtering through stained glass windows, tinting the corridors with a friendly, cheering glow. Kurt had been here once before, the day after he stumbled into a job with the watch. It was a requirement of induction that all new recruits be presented to the commander before taking their oath of office. Kurt couldn't recall his last visit in any detail, it was buried in a haze at the back of his mind, along with all the events that had driven him out of Altdorf, the dark days he saw as a warrior during the war against Chaos and the tragedies that had befallen him. Like most of the men who survived that conflict, those who saw the face of the enemy and lived to tell the tale, Kurt rarely spoke of his experiences on the battlefield. Seeing your brothers in arms struck down by a foe of such ferocity and unalloyed evil left deep wounds, buried far below the surface in places from which a few ales would not prise them free. Only cowards and liars bragged of their war exploits.

He looked down at his hands, studying the network of scars left behind by all the battles he'd fought to reach this doorway on this day. Had it been worth the sacrifices, the losses? No, in truth it hadn't. Kurt knew he could never recover all he had lost back in Altdorf, all that had perished on the battlefields of the Empire. But what's past had passed, as his old watch sergeant had been fond of saying. Better not to dwell on things you can't change. So Kurt determined to make a life for himself in the here and now, putting aside the memories, the pain of what had happened. If he didn't, they could drive him insane. Sigmar knows, that was how he'd ended up in Marienburg. He had no wish to relive those dark days again.

"Well, well, who's this?" a snide voice asked. Kurt looked up to see four men approaching in uniforms of the watch, all bearing the insignia of captains. He recognised them within moments, as much by reputation as by their appearances. The man who had spoken first was Bram Quist, a scar-faced veteran of twenty years in the Black Caps. He was responsible for keeping the peace in Noordmuur, to the north of Marienburg. On his left was a barrel-chested behemoth with a bushy red beard and jovial face-that could only be Titus Rottenrow, who ran the districts known as Rijkspoort to the east.

On Quist's right was a painfully thin man with waspish features and an unusual, rolling gait: Zachirias Wout. He led the watch in the Tempelwijk, to the west of Suiddock. Another figure was strolling along behind them, but Kurt could not yet see the final man's face. Even so, he had little doubt who it could be. The first three were among the leading captains in the city, all fiercely ambitious, all eager to take the commander's place when he eventually retired or died. But everybody knew who the golden boy of the watch was, the prime candidate for the succession: Georges Sandler. Sure enough, when the quartet reached Kurt the last man was revealed as Sandler, a luxurious mane of brown hair swept back from those aristocratic features, the hint of flab around his jowls giving the face a curiously boyish aspect.

Kurt snapped to attention. "Watch Sergeant Kurt Schnell, stationed in the Goudberg district!"

Sandler chuckled at Kurt's military precision. "I say, this chap's taking himself a bit seriously, don't you think, hmm?"

Quist scowled at Sandler. "Not all of us were born with a silver spoon in our mouths, Georges. Some of us had to earn our commissions, instead of having our parents buy them for us." Kurt felt Quist's gaze shift to him. "That accent's pure Altdorf, and judging by your stance… ex-military?" Kurt nodded. "Best battle you ever fought in?"

"There are no best battles," Kurt replied, "only victories and defeats."

"Quite the philosopher," Sandler quipped, earning a cheap laugh from Rottenrow and Wout. They were still guffawing when the doors to the antechamber opened and the captains were beckoned inside. Quist waited until the others had entered before resting a hand on Kurt's left shoulder.

"Don't listen to that buffoon," the veteran growled. "He's never fought for anything in his life." Quist was about to move through the doors when his brow furrowed. "Schnell, did you say?"

Kurt nodded. Here it comes, he thought, resisting the urge to lie.

"Any relation to Erwin Schnell?"

"He's my father."

"Old Ironbeard is your father?" Quist asked, unable to keep the admiration from his ravaged face. "Then you must be…" As realisation dawned, so Quist's expression soured. He removed his hand from Kurt's shoulder, as if it had been resting on a dung heap. By the time Quist had entered the antechamber, he was muttering curses under his breath so violent they would have shocked any passing sailors. The tall, forbidding doors slammed shut, and the disgraced son of Altdorf was left alone once more in the corridor.

Kurt closed his eyes and waited for the wave of shame to pass.

Would he never be free of the past? The Watch Commander sat on a tall-backed chair behind an imposing desk, built from the timbers of a shipwrecked clipper that ran aground on Rijker's Isle forty years earlier. All this stood atop a raised dais, supposedly constructed to support the vast weight of the desk. In fact it was designed to help impose the commander's authority on all who came into his office. It was a large, ornately decorated chamber, created to intimidate and unease all entering it. Few left the better for having visited this place. The current commander needed no architectural affectations to impose his authority on anybody. He had a rasping voice and piercing, intense eyes that could unsettle the sternest of men. He was prone to laughing at the pain or discomfit of others, particularly when it was most inappropriate.

Some said he was an illegitimate genius who used his personal charisma to escape being drowned at birth with the other orphans begat by Marienburg's whores. Others claimed he had made some pact with the Dark Gods, no doubt signed in his own blood, as it was the only way to explain his irresistible rise from lowly gatekeeper to commander. But everybody agreed on two things-he was an incredibly shrewd judge of character, and a bastard in every sense of the word.

"Sergeant Schnell-tell me about him," the commander said to Belladonna. She was standing in front of his desk, hands clasped behind her back, steadily returning his gaze. Meeting his eye was the best way of earning his respect, she had learned through bitter experience.

"He's quick and agile, good with his fists and feet. I'd say he doesn't start many fights, but he certainly knows how to end them. I used the coins you gave me to start a bar brawl at the Seagull and Spittoon last night. Schnell had already been on duty for twelve hours by that time, but he bested four men far larger than him with ease. He's brave, authoritative and a natural leader-takes command well. Had no trouble fending off the advances of an overly amorous serving wench, either."

The commander couldn't mask a smile. "Let me guess-you bribed her as well?"

"No, there was no need. Inga seemed determined to live up to her title of serving wench. I had one other observation-Kurt Schnell is among the most ambitious men I've ever met."

"Even more so than that fool Sandler?"

"I did say 'among the most ambitious'," Belladonna replied lightly.

The commander frowned for a moment. "And how did you assess his level of ambition during a tavern brawl? I know your powers of deduction can be remarkable, my dear, but still…"

“I’m told he’s been waiting outside your antechamber for two hours.”

“Hmm, very well. Send in Quist, Sandler, and those two imbeciles that hang on Sandler’s every word. Give us five minutes before telling Schnell to join us.”

Belladonna nodded. “There’s one other matter, sir-I’d like to request a transfer.”

“Why?”

“Much as I’ve enjoyed studying the machinations of office politics in your presence, I believe my talents would be put to better use on the streets. You don’t need me here.”

“Perhaps not, but I enjoy your company,” the commander replied evenly. But his face had hardened and his eyes betrayed seething anger at her request.

“Be that as it may, I believe I would better serve the city in a more active role.”

“No doubt you have somewhere in mind?”

Belladonna smiled. “Working with Schnell. I doubt things would ever be dull on his watch.”

The commander smiled, like a shark about to devour its prey. “You should be careful what you wish for. I’m told the Cathay people have a saying about it being a curse to live in interesting times.” He placed his elbows on the armrests of his chair, forming his fingers into a steeple in front of his brooding face. “When you bring Schnell before me, stay and observe what happens. If you still wish to go where I am sending him, then you are fool enough to deserve that fate-I will not stand in your way.”

She nodded her thanks and retreated to the antechamber. Kurt was surprised when the woman from the Seagull and Spittoon appeared from the commander’s antechamber. “You can come inside now,” she said, beckoning him in. Kurt had assumed she was merely a messenger, but it seemed she acted as adjutant to the commander. A curious arrangement in a city where women wielded the most power as matriarchs at home, or holding sway in courtly circles. Few females were seen in law enforcement, and fewer still in the watch. Perhaps she was the commander’s consort, and he employed her in his office as a ruse to hide her real role? Whatever her true function, Kurt sensed she was sympathetic to his cause. He jerked his head to the grand doors leading into the commander’s office.

“I saw Quist, Sandler, Rottenrow and Wout go in-who else is in the room?”

“Just the commander.”

“Four captains and the boss,” Kurt mused, trying to make sense of these portents.

Belladonna smiled at him kindly. “Don’t worry, you’re not in trouble. Yet.” She waited another minute, busying herself with a few parchment scrolls at a desk before moving to the doors leading into the commander’s office. “It’s time.” She admitted Kurt, before following him inside.

“Come forward,” the commander called, beckoning Kurt closer to the raised dais. The four captains were split into pairs, Rottenrow and Wout on one side of the dais, Quist and Sandler on the other. Kurt chose to ignore them and concentrate his attention on the commander. Always focus on the deadliest enemy in any situation, Kurt’s father had taught him. Deal with them first and the others will be easier prey. The brave warrior fights the hardest foe, even if it costs him dear-that is the mark of bravery. “First of all, I’d like to congratulate you, Sergeant Schnell.”

“Thank you, sir,” Kurt replied. He said no more, holding the commander’s gaze but refusing to ask the obvious question-why was he being congratulated? Instead Kurt counted inside his head: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight-

“Very good, Schnell! Most people in this situation cannot allow seven seconds of silence to pass without caving in and asking for more information. You show remarkable resilience of will.”

“Must be in the blood,” Quist muttered. “Shame he doesn’t have more of Old Ironbeard’s talents.” The captain was silenced by a glance from the commander, before the focus shifted back to Kurt.

“You’ve done well since joining the Black Caps. Some might even describe it as a meteoric rise through the ranks. In all the areas of Marienburg where you’ve served, reported crimes on dry land have dropped dramatically and clear-up rates for past offences have doubled. You’ve also been instrumental in ridding the watch of its more corrupt elements in those districts.”

“I’ve been fortunate in my assignments,” Kurt replied. “The likes of Goudberg are not what I’d describe as the city’s most dangerous or challenging districts.”

“So, it sounds like you’re more than ready for something that’s more of a stretch, yes?”

Kurt nodded. Here it comes…

“Good. I’m hereby promoting you to rank of acting captain. Your task for the next twelve months will be to re-establish a presence in an area of the city that we’ve been guilty of neglecting for far too long. You will reopen the old station and impose the firm spank of authority on the more recalcitrant elements nearby. It will not be a simple task by any means, so I’ve asked these captains to provide the help you’ll need. Each of them is sacrificing three of their best men to staff your new posting and each assures me you’ll be getting the best of the best

from among their ranks."

A snigger escaped one of the captains, but Kurt did his best to ignore it.

The commander got up from his seat and came round the desk toward Kurt, but remained atop the dais. Even so, his eyes were just level with the newly promoted captain. "Succeed in this task, Schnell, and your promotion will become permanent. Fail, and-"

"I won't fail," Kurt cut in, his voice sounded far more certain than he felt. "Where is my station?"

The commander smiled broadly, mischief in his eyes. "Three Penny Bridge."

Kurt felt the muscles in his jaw line ripple involuntarily as he fought to keep the panic from his eyes. He was not a native of Marienburg but he knew the reputation of Three Penny Bridge all too well. It was the most dangerous, most lawless area of the city. The rule of law had not touched the benighted district of Suiddock for five long years. If you believed the legends, the abandoned station was cursed, destined to attract doom upon all who set foot inside it. "You want me to reopen the station on Three Penny Bridge?" he asked helplessly, wanting to make sure this was not all some elaborate practical joke on him.

"Correct. You did say you wanted a challenge, Schnell."

Kurt nodded, "Didn't the last captain go insane after being infected by Chaos?"

"Joost Holismus was a good man," Sandler interjected. "I considered him a close, personal friend. Joost would never give in to that taint. He drowned himself, rather than see others infected."

The commander snorted derisively. "Believe that if you wish, Sandler. The rest of us have our own suspicions about what happened to Joost, and none of them are quite so noble."

Sandler started to protest but quickly fell silent beneath the commander's glower.

Kurt took a deep breath. "When do I start?"

"Tonight. Today, if you wish-the sooner that place is cleaned up, the better," the commander enthused, clapping a hand on Kurt's right shoulder. "Good luck, Schnell-hopefully you will not need it, but I wish you every good fortune in the task ahead."

"Thank you, sir." Kurt stepped back, saluted and turned away. Belladonna was already holding open the door for him to leave. As he strode from the office, Kurt could hear the captains laughing and joking with each other about his fate.

"Twelve months? He'll be lucky to last twelve days!" Wout cackled.

"Twelve days? He'll be lucky to last twelve hours over there,"

Rottenrow chortled.

"I give him until Geheimnistag," the Watch Commander said. "If he's still there and still alive after the Day of Mystery, it would be a small miracle." The others laughed heartily as the door closed behind Kurt.

"Did you see the look on his face when you mentioned the Three Penny Bridge, sir? Priceless!"

Belladonna rested a comforting hand on Kurt's left arm. "Don't listen to them. They're just grateful you got the poison chalice, instead of them."

"Thanks," he grimaced. "That helps a lot."

She shrugged. "Have you got anyone in the city you trust, someone to back you up?"

Kurt pondered her question for a moment. "One man, but he's retired from the watch."

"Talk him out of it. You'll need all the help you can get where you're going." Belladonna gave his arm a gentle squeeze of encouragement before escorting him from the antechamber. The doors swung shut behind him and Kurt Schnell, acting captain for the Three Penny Bridge, was back out in the corridor where he'd waited since long before dawn. Now he was wishing he'd stayed in bed.

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Belladonna waited until the captains had departed before re-entering the commander's office. Unusually, he had stayed away from his desk, waiting for her return. "And how did our new acting captain react once he left my presence?"

"Like a man who'd just been punched in the groin."

"Well, at least he's not a fool." He moved closer to Belladonna, until they were within touching distance. "And what of you? Joining Schnell is a fool's errand."

"I still want to be part of his team."

The commander moved closer still, until their hips were almost touching. He was half a head shorter than her, so his breath was warming her neck. One of his hands slid round her waist, while the other explored more sensitive parts of her body. "You need not put yourself in such danger, my dear. I could make your life very comfortable, in exchange for certain… tasks."

"I prefer to earn my rewards," she said, struggling to keep the disgust from her face.

He leaned closer still, his eyes hungry with lust. “Oh, you’ll earn them, be certain of that.”

Belladonna snapped a knee up into his groin, the impact so hard it lifted his feet off the floor. The commander crumpled like a cloth sack, abruptly emptied of its contents. He gasped for breath, spitting vile obscenities at her. She smiled down at the prostrate figure curled upon the floor.

“Can I take it you’re giving me permission to leave, sir?”

Another string of curses told Belladonna where she could go and what she could do upon arrival.

“Well, I’m not sure that’s physically possible, but I’ll take it as a suggestion rather than an order. Goodbye, sir.”

Belladonna walked slowly from the imposing chamber, a wry smile on her lips. She’d been waiting a long time to repay that slug of a man for his wandering eyes. With any luck, he wouldn’t be able to walk straight for a week after that. Perhaps she should summon an apothecary to help heal the commander’s bruised pride. No, let him suffer. She had little doubt he planned to make her suffer now.

CHAPTER THREE

"A new captain's been appointed to the Three Penny Bridge?" Adalbert Henschmann smiled, but his unsightly teeth and thin lips made the expression look more like a sneer to anyone who didn't know him. Those who did know him knew better than to pass comment on the sinister nature of Henschmann's smile, particularly if they wanted to keep their own teeth. "How delicious. Does this fool have a name?"

The small, weasel-faced creature grovelling in front of Henschmann dared to look up at its master. "Schnell, his name's Kurt Schnell. He's from Altdorf originally-his father was Old Ironbeard Schnell."

"Then the man's either a rogue or a fool to have wound up in Marienburg, let alone being assigned as captain of the watch in my domain," Henschmann growled. "How many men does he have?"

"Supposed to be a dozen-at least two have already deserted, in fear for their lives."

"A sensible reaction, in the circumstances." Henschmann stamped his foot down beside the fearful wretch cowering in front of him. "And you-are you one of the unfortunates assigned to this fool Schnell?"

Willy Bescheiden nodded, greasy strands of dark hair falling in front of his beady little eyes. "Yes, Mr. Henschmann, I am. I think Quist must have realised I was feeding you information from Noordmuur."

"Well, that was only a matter of time. Quist is many things, but he's no fool." Henschmann peered out of the window of his bedroom at the Marienburg Gentleman's Club. It was an opulently decorated chamber on the upper floor, replete with four-poster bed, a writing desk and chair, and a rich, wooden wardrobe bulging with expensive, garishly coloured garments. Henschmann prided himself on his fashion sense, replacing all his clothes twice a year to keep up with the latest trends. Nobody dared tell the de facto crime boss of Marienburg he had the taste of a colour-blind lunatic, since he also had the temper of a psychopathic murderer. That probably had something to do with the fact he was a psychopathic murderer, so at least his temper matched his methods of maintaining control over the city's vast criminal underbelly.

Through the window Henschmann could see much of nearby Suiddock: the neighbouring headquarters of the Stevedores and Teamsters Guild, where his counterpart Lea-Jan Cobbius ruled with a rod of iron; the Golden Lotus Dreaming House, the most notorious drug den in all of Marienburg, if the truth were told; and beyond them

the Three Penny Bridge, spanning the cut that separated the islands of Riddra and Stoessel to the east. Beyond that but out of sight was Luydenhoek, the third island in the chain. All were under Henschmann's control, all were effectively his property-and now the watch was daring to send an outsider to bring the law to these lawless streets and canals. Henschmann almost pitied the fool.

"So be it," he announced. "Remind me, Willy, what is the old station being used for?"

"That's where the bodyguards of your, err, associates in the Gentleman's Club wait while their masters are gathered here. Otherwise it serves as the Abandon Hope Tavern, a place for thugs to wet their lips, dip their wicks and punch each other senseless. Cobbius' half-witted cousin Abram likes to think of it as his own private club, although those who've seen his privates-"

Bescheiden's words were abruptly cut off as Henschmann took care to grind the heel of his left boot on the informant's hand as he passed the grovelling guttersnipe. "Yes, thank you-I do know the principal functions of a tavern, and I have no wish to hear anything about the life of Abram Cobbius."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Henschmann," Bescheiden winced, snot dribbling down from his nostrils, soaking his feeble attempt at growing a moustache. "Of course you don't, sir."

"Very well. Go back to the tavern and tell those inside to prepare a special, Three Penny Bridge welcome for this upstart from Altdorf-they'll know what to do. After that I want you to stick close to this Schnell, find out his plans, his thinking. Report back to me daily, more often if you believe it necessary, and you shall be compensated for your…" Henschmann strode past Bescheiden again, once more crushing the cowering watchman's hand underfoot, "…pains. Is that clear?"

Bescheiden merely nodded this time, wisely keeping any further commentary to himself.

"Good. Now, get out of my sight. I'm expecting a visitor and the last thing I want her to see when she walks in is your vile, repulsive presence." Henschmann tossed a few gold coins against the door. "Take those as a down payment for your services, and get you gone."

The informant was scrambling to retrieve the coins before they had settled to the wooden floor. He gathered them in his yellowed fingers and scuttled out of the bedchamber, doffing his black cap to Henschmann as he left. Bescheiden was still making his way down to the ground floor when a beautiful, raven-haired woman clad in alluring silks of red and black appeared at the foot of the stairs. She waited until he had passed before venturing up to her client for the afternoon, not bothering to acknowledge Bescheiden's lecherous

attention.

Willy by name and willing by nature-that was Bescheiden's motto. If only the ladies had been as willing, he might not have had to spend so many of his bribes buying their affection. But he doubted his entire life's earnings would be enough to purchase the attentions of the woman ascending to entertain Adalbert Henschmann. Courtesans like Madame von Tiezer were few and far between in this city, her clientele only the richest and most powerful people. Travelling to Three Penny Bridge took Kurt most of the morning because he decided to arrive on foot. Streets and thoroughfares in Marienburg were perpetually crowded during the hours of daylight by travellers, peddlers and citizens, but the problem doubled on any given Marktag. The grand traditions of the market day may have eroded over the years, but most housewives still chose Marktag as their day to go shopping and gossiping. Craftsmen and artisans sent their apprentices out on the streets to sell items that would otherwise have to be scrapped, while farmers and fishermen ventured into the city with fresh supplies of their latest crop or catch.

With so much money changing hands, Marktag was also the busiest day of the week for pickpockets and thieves, plunderers, pilferers, brigands and bullies. The war had made the overcrowding worse, with crippled soldiers lining the streets begging for scraps, while deserters lurked in taverns and bordellos, trying to vanquish their sorrows and guilt.

Kurt could hardly walk a hundred paces without hearing somebody scream from a dark side alley, or without being accosted by some citizen or merchant left out of pocket by fraud or theft. The Black Caps' headgear had been chosen for a reason. It made the watchmen easier to spot in a crowd and offered them some slight measure of protection from the outrages perpetrated on ordinary citizens. He told them all where he was going and what he planned to do there, and his path miraculously cleared-until the next cry for help, the next belligerent victim stepped in his way. Eventually he removed his cloth headgear and found progress faster. Overhead gulls wheeled and squawked in the air, the cacophony of their cries a constant presence for any who chose to live in Marienburg. Kurt had been told you got used to the sound of the gulls after ten or twenty years. In the meantime he did his best to ignore the birds, even if their cries echoed the mocking laughter of the captains in that grand office.

The sun was directly overhead when Kurt eventually set foot on Luydenhoek. Another hour elapsed before he reached the western end of Stoessel, so narrow were the streets of Suiddock and so dense the constant press of people, animals and carts. He knew to walk in the shadow of the overhanging buildings at either side of the streets. Only

newcomers walked down the central cobbles, where urine and faeces ran along a gutter searching for an outlet. But it was the unexpected dowsing from a brimming chamber pot emptied out a first floor window that caught most new arrivals in the city unawares. Few made the same mistake twice.

Kurt heard a crier calling two o'clock as he got his first glimpse of Three Penny Bridge. The structure itself was little different from many other bridges around Marienburg. Houses and shops stood along either side of the span, such was the lack of space available for construction elsewhere in the city. Buildings hung out over the cut slicing between the much larger Rijksweg canal to the north and Bruynwarr canal to the south. Kurt was always amazed that those precariously perched structures did not topple into the water more often, but most had stood for more than a hundred years. No doubt most would stand for another hundred-barring outside intervention. But which of them was the abandoned station? Kurt paused near the foot of the bridge, letting his eyes become accustomed to what little light fell on Three Penny Bridge, looking for clues about which building housed his new quarters.

A line of heavily fortified homes lined the northerly side of the span, all of them looking like they were expecting war to break out at any minute. No doubt they were burgled or attacked on a frequent basis, Kurt surmised. Several looked like they had been abandoned altogether, while another was a burnt-out shell, smoke stains above the charred windows resembling the kohl eye make-up favoured by whores.

Three structures dominated the southern side of Three Penny Bridge-an abandoned temple at the Stoessel end, a fish market at the Riddra end, and a large, menacing structure in the middle. Working girls hung from the first floor windows, calling out to the men passing below, offering them fun, laughs and a good time. Drunks were sprawled in front of the entrance, lending the structure a disreputable air. Kurt could hear laughter and revelry spilling out from within, the familiar sounds of men gambling and arguing. Above the entrance jutted a twisted metal strut, and from this hung a battered and broken wooden sign. The word "Watch" had been obscured by a new name for the establishment: the Abandon Hope Tavern.

Kurt realised his first task would be reclaiming the abandoned station, and it would not be easy. Make a mess of this and he would quickly prove the captains had been right to mock him. "At least I won't be on my own," he muttered. "My recruits should have got here before me."

He studied the throng shuffling back and forth across the most infamous bridge in Marienburg, searching for likely candidates, the

best of the best that he'd been promised. But his heart sank like a stone on seeing the raw material he'd been supplied.

Seven men were lingering beside the fish market, trying to look like they didn't know each other and certainly not as if they were meant to be there together. They all appeared bored, dishevelled and unfit. Several were leering at passing women, others were sipping covertly from bottles that no doubt contained liquor, and the remainder appeared quietly terrified. Not one of them was in the full regulation uniform of a watchman and none were wearing their black cap.

Guiltily, Kurt realised he had also removed his distinctive headgear. He retrieved it from his leather waist belt and positioned the cap proudly atop his head. If I lead by example, they should follow, he hoped. Time to find out if all the things his mentor had taught him would work as well on the Three Penny Bridge as they did in gentle Goudberg.

"Good afternoon, men," Kurt said firmly as he approached them, trying to make his voice sound more positive than he felt. "You've all been assigned to that station, correct?" He jerked a thumb toward the Abandon Hope Tavern, not bothering to acknowledge the travesty it had become.

Nobody replied.

"I asked if you've all been assigned to that station. Is that correct?" Kurt repeated, letting anger seep into his voice, making certain all seven of them had heard him clearly. They started to straighten up, realising their new leader had arrived and he meant business. A few guiltily slid their black caps back on their heads. Eventually a small, insipid member of the group stepped forwards to speak.

"We were sent here, but some of the others didn't bother turning up," he said.

"Why not?"

A shrug was the sole response.

Kurt took a deep breath, trying to maintain his calm. He stepped closer to the self-appointed spokesman and grabbed hold of the craven creature by the throat. "What's your name?"

"Bescheiden. W-Willy Bescheiden."

"Willy Bescheiden what?"

Bafflement clouded Willy's beady eyes. "Willy Bescheiden the third?" That got a laugh from the others. Kurt responded by tightening his grip around Willy's throat, lifting the watchman into the air until Willy's feet were off the cobbles, kicking uselessly at nothing.

"Let's try that again, shall we?" Kurt suggested. "If I ask your name, you should tell me your name-and then feel free to add the

word ‘sir’ to the end of that sentence. Is that quite clear?” Willy did his best to nod, his face slowly turning puce. “In fact, if I ask you anything, or you should need to talk to me for any reason, you will end every sentence with the word ‘sir’. Do you understand?” Willy nodded once more, his features now rapidly changing from puce to a sickening shade of purple.

Kurt opened his hand and Willy tumbled to the cobbles, coughing and gasping for air, retching up a thin stream of green bile. Kurt waited until the unfortunate figure lying in the faeces gutter had recovered enough to speak. “So, let’s try it one more time, shall we? What’s your name?”

“Willy Bescheiden-sir.”

“That’s better.” Kurt smiled at the other recruits, making sure they all knew he meant business. “And why didn’t the other men assigned to this station turn up, Willy?”

“They were afraid what might happen here.”

“Sorry, what was that you said at the end of that sentence?”

Willy scrambled backwards, trying to get himself beyond the kicking range of Kurt’s leather boots. “They were afraid of what might happen here, sir.”

“See how easy it is to pick up the simplest of habits?”

“Yes, sir.”

Kurt nodded, letting his eyes wander over the faces of his charges. He had gotten their attention, but he needed to do more than thrash some sense into them if he wanted their respect. Fear was an effective leadership tool for a while, but without respect he would never get their best. A demonstration of will was required, to prove he would never ask them to do something he wasn’t willing to do himself. Any soldier was only as good as the commander leading him; Kurt’s father had taught him that.

He drew his club from its leather loop at his side and began tapping its heavy end against the palm of one hand. “That building has been stolen from the watch, from us in effect. Our first task is to reclaim that house of drunkenness and ill repute, transform it into a haven for law-abiding citizens, a place where people can come for help. It will not be easy and it will not be painless, but it is necessary if the watch is going to bring justice back to Suiddock. Who’s with me?”

Two of the recruits raised their hands, responding to Kurt’s passion and his rhetoric. Two more twitched but kept their hands buried in their pockets. The others, including the still stricken Bescheiden, made no effort to respond- their attitude was all too apparent. Kurt called forward the two men who had volunteered to help. One was a lumbering brute, a bear of a man who stood at least a

head higher than Kurt. His shoulders were so broad he probably had to turn sideways to get through most doorways, but he had gentle eyes in stark contrast to his imposing physique. The other man was Kurt's build and age, but he bore more scars on his face and hands than Kurt had ever seen on a living creature. His face had a haunted look, little surprise in the aspect of someone who had survived such injuries.

"What are your names?"

"Joachim Narbig," the smaller man replied, "I serve Manann, the city and you -in that order, sir."

Kurt let that slide for now, knowing he needed all the allies he could get. The source of Narbig's religious fervour could be determined later and dealt with, if necessary. He turned to the other volunteer, an eyebrow arched enquiringly. "Jacques Scheusal," the man-mountain replied in a thick Bretonnian accent.

"Just what we need, another bloody foreigner," one of the others muttered, earning a laugh from his colleagues. Kurt pushed past Jacques and Joachim to confront the other watchmen.

"Who said that?" None of them spoke. "Come on, show us the courage of your convictions-or are you too much of a coward to even do that?"

After a few moments one of the recruits stepped forward to confront Kurt, a cocky grin smeared across his face like pork fat on a crust of bread. He stood at ease, thumbs hooked in his waist belt, a faint twitch troubling the corner of one eye. "I did-sir," he said, with heavy sarcasm on the last word.

"What's your name?"

"Raufbold, Jorg Raufbold-but all the women call me Gorgeous Jorg."

"And you don't approve of foreigners in the watch?"

"We should kick 'em out of the watch," Raufbold replied. "This is our city, let us run it."

"Really? I didn't notice you volunteering to help me clear out the tavern."

Raufbold ran a hand across his jaw line. "The ladies love me the way I am. Go in there and you'll get your face kicked in. You want to be a hero, go right ahead. We'll wait here, see how long you last."

Kurt stepped closer, until his nose was almost touching Raufbold's. "Aren't you forgetting something?" The watchman shrugged before looking over his shoulder to smirk at the others. That expression changed rapidly when Kurt closed his fist around Raufbold's groin. "What I said to Willy applies to you too-to all of you. When you speak to me, you call me 'sir' or suffer the consequences. Now, Gorgeous Jorg, how much do you think the ladies will still love

you if I crush your jewels between my fingers?"

Raufbold bleated an unintelligible reply.

Kurt tightened his grip further, eliciting a sob of pain from the watchman. "What was that?"

"I don't know-sir!"

"That's better." Kurt let go and Raufbold sank to his knees, all trace of cockiness squeezed out of him. Kurt glared at the other reluctant recruits. "The rest of you can wait here. Jacques, Joachim and I will now show you how we deal with those who would make a mockery of our station. Watch and learn." He marched towards the converted building, hoping the two volunteers would follow. To his relief, they did. The easy part was over. Anybody could intimidate a pair of fools. Reclaiming the station would be much harder. Abram Cobbius was enjoying the attentions of a serving wench when three strangers walked into his tavern. In truth, he did not own the watering hole, but he considered it a home from home. After a hard day extorting money from nearby residents and merchants, Abram was fond of retiring to the Abandon Hope Tavern for a tankard or two of Marienburg's most violent ale. He knew he had nothing to fear, thanks to the proximity of the Stevedores' and Teamsters' Guild headquarters. While cousin Lea-Jan remained in charge of that powerful union, Abram was safe from harm. Few would dare challenge him and none would dare infringe upon his exploits. So why in the name of Manann were three Black Caps daring to invade his domain? Abram pushed the wench aside and stood up, displeased at being interrupted.

"Who gave you permission to come in here?" he snarled, slouching towards the unwelcome trio.

One of the threesome stepped forward to meet Abram, a determined set to his face. "I was about to ask you the same question. Are you responsible for what's happened here?"

"If you mean turning an abandoned building into the finest tavern south of the Rijksweg, then I guess I can take credit for that," Abram replied before gesturing at the greasy, yellow walls and beer-stained floorboards. The ceiling was hidden above a cloud of pipe smoke. "I let the wenches choose the decor."

"How noble of you," the intruder said. "We've come to reclaim this property for the watch."

Abram laughed out loud, unable to stop himself. He swung round to his seven henchmen, all of whom were watching this exchange with amusement between swilling ale and bothering the other wenches. "You hear that, men? Our visitor is reclaiming the station!" They laughed in response.

"Got them well trained, haven't you?" the stranger asked. "Can they do any other tricks? Balance a pig's bladder on their noses,

perhaps, or roll over and play dead?"

Abram's amusement was fading fast. "You'll be the one playing dead if you don't leave now." He took a better look at the Black Cap leader, assessing his enemy's capabilities. Abram ignored the other two, knowing his own men would deal with them in the unlikely event this turned to violence. The intruder was in his middle years, with a firm jaw and no trace of fat round the face. The watchman tunic was stretched across a wiry physique, muscles bulging the sleeves. His features were implacable, no fear in those piercing, ice-blue eyes, while the shaven head spoke of a man not swayed by vanity. He meant business and he had the bravado to go with it. The intruder had a powerful physical presence that would intimidate most people, but Abram couldn't care less. This place was his territory. "Your accent tells me you're not local. If you were, you'd know better than to come in here, trying to throw your weight around. Walk out while you still can, stranger-understand?"

"Perfectly." The newcomer made as if to leave, but paused, raising a finger in the air. "There's just one thing before I go." He beckoned for Abram to come closer, so he could whisper something. Amused, Abram leaned closer, expecting the fool to do the sensible thing and offer an abject apology. Instead the Black Cap smashed his forehead into the bridge of Abram's nose. The extortionist staggered backwards, white spots dancing in front of his eyes. Pain lanced through his head as blood gouted from both nostrils, soaking the front of his handsome leather jerkin. Abram had the misfortune to forget about the chair he'd had to walk around to confront the intruders, and fell straight over it, his head thudding into the floorboards.

"Get him!" Abram screamed at his cronies. "Everybody, get him!"

The henchmen stood up, ready for action, murder in their eyes. The three Black Caps glanced at each other and smiled-until another twelve henchmen appeared from staircases leading off the central drinking area of the tavern, all hastily fastening their trousers back up. "Ahh," the leader of the Black Caps sighed. "Bugger." Jacques Scheusal considered himself a simple man. He believed in loyalty and following orders, doing your best and never giving in. When his new captain had asked for volunteers to clear out the station, Jacques had not hesitated. He knew the effort would almost certainly involve fighting and danger, but a man of his size had little to fear in most melees. He could charge through any door, flatten most opponents with a single blow from his meaty forearms, and he had survived more stabbings than he cared to remember.

As the biggest and burliest watchman in Rijkspoort, he had been used as brute force, his mere presence enough to intimidate anyone looking to start trouble. Jacques had been delighted to get transferred

to Three Penny Bridge, hopeful it might mean better prospects. His time in Rijkspoort had been blighted by anti-Bretonnian comments from men meant to be his brothers in arms. He was less impressed to discover Raufbold had also been transferred, since it was Raufbold who'd led the snide remarks. The new captain's attitude and Altdorf accent were more promising, but his grasp of tactics left a little to be desired in Jacques' opinion. Starting a bar brawl in Marienburg's most notorious drinking house? Even a simple man knew there were easier ways of making an impression.

The fighting was fast and furious. Three Black Caps against half a dozen drunken thieves and robbers had seemed favourable odds when Jacques followed his new boss inside the tavern. But three against eighteen? Even for a man mountain like Jacques, that was asking a lot. He fought well, swatting aside four of the enemy in his first charge. But first one man, then another jumped onto Jacques' back and wrapped their arms round his massive head and neck, fingers clawing at his eyes and mouth. He spotted a wooden supporting beam nearby and marched backwards towards it. The first man on his back let go with a howl of pain, but the other clung on grimly, his hands closing round Jacques' throat, choking the big man's air supply. Still Jacques fought on, smashing a fist down on the head of a passing opponent, rendering them senseless. But darkness was overwhelming him, clouding his vision and weakening his legs. Jacques sank to one knee, hefty hands still flailing at the thugs buzzing around him like flies. Finally he blacked out, pitching face-first into the beer-soaked floorboards. Joachim Narbig fought like a man possessed, using swift, precise movements to disable each foe as they drew near. An elbow into the throat choked one enemy, while two fingers stabbed into the eyes sent another howling away in pain. Joachim took seven drunkards out of action, all the while muttering the catechism of a true believer, calling on Manann to protect him from those who did not know the ways of righteousness. But even Manann could not hold back such a tide and sheer weight of numbers were Joachim's undoing. Still fighting valiantly, he was driven back out onto the bridge, taking two of Abram's henchmen with him. "A little help wouldn't go astray," he snarled at the other watchmen. Kurt was full of admiration for the way Jacques and Joachim fought, especially considering the uneven odds and unfamiliar territory. Both were worthy additions to the new station's complement of men, and could well be potential candidates for the sergeants he would need. Of course, his first priority was surviving this foolish attempt to reclaim the station. Kurt knew he should have discovered the enemy's strength before starting a bar brawl. His old sergeant would not have been impressed by such a wanton disregard for tactics or common sense.

Still, there was plenty of time for self-recriminations later, assuming he was still alive to indulge in them. First he had to get out of here.

By the time Jacques was felled, less than a dozen foes remained on their feet. Unfortunately for Kurt, Joachim was sent sailing back outside mere moments later. That left Kurt on his own, ten murderous men advancing on him, several already bloodied by the brawling. Front and centre was the leader of the pack, black rings forming under his eyes from the badly broken nose Kurt had shattered. “Do you have any idea who I am?” the furious thug demanded.

“Can’t say I know your name,” Kurt admitted, “but your face seems familiar. I saw an ass whose rear end looked just like you on my way here. Perhaps you two are related?”

“My name is Abram Cobbius. My cousin is one of the most powerful men in all Marienburg.”

“Uh-huh. Get on well, do you?”

“Kill this fool,” Abram commanded. His men advanced on Kurt, blades and cudgels drawn, ready to rend him limb from limb. Kurt backed slowly away from them, until the solid wooden bar prevented him retreating any further. His eyes darted round the tavern, searching for anything that might be of use. The advancing horde had blocked off any chance of escaping through the front doors, but there was a large leaded glass window at the other end of the bar looking out across the Bruynwarr to the southern part of Suiddock. Kurt had no wish to sample the canal water, but retreat was always better than surrender in his experience, especially if the enemy was not planning on taking any prisoners. He jumped up onto the bar as the nearest thugs sliced the air where he’d been standing with their knives.

“It’s been a pleasure making your acquaintance, but we’ll have to settle this later,” Kurt smiled.

“I said kill him!” Abram bellowed.

Kurt was already running along the bar towards the window. So much for making a strong first impression, he thought idly, before throwing himself head first at the leaded glass window.

CHAPTER FOUR

The boatman licked his lips nervously as he guided the narrow craft into the cut separating Riddra and Stoessel. Marcellus Punt had no wish to pass under Three Penny Bridge-you never knew what might happen to anyone who went near that benighted span-but he was being paid handsomely to do so. Besides it was the nature of his passenger that was perturbing the boatman. “If I’d known what you were, I’d never have taken the fare,” he grumbled for the fifth time of asking, not that his passenger had asked. “All I got told was your name, Otto. They never said you were one of… them.”

The passenger sat at the other end of the tiny vessel, a hood drawn up over his hairless head, thin fingers clasped in front of his haughty, patrician features. “So you have said,” Otto replied. “Several times.”

“Well, it ain’t right, is it? False defences or some such.”

“I take it you mean false pretences.”

“That’s the one! False pretences, that’s what it is.”

“I make no pretence about my vocation when I asked your employer, Mr. Undershaft, to organise transportation for me back to my abode. If he chose not to tell you about me, that was his decision.”

“Well, it still ain’t right. Ain’t proper. You should have your own boat to do your business in. Not frightening the life out of poor, innocent working souls who are just trying to earn a crust.”

Otto glared at the boatman, as if staring into his very soul. “I sense you are many things, Punt, but innocent is not one of them. You have the blood of three men on your conscience.”

“You can’t tell that, not just by looking at me!” the boatman howled, his fears about the Three Penny Bridge quite forgotten as they passed beneath it. “Besides, there was only two of them and they both had it coming. Most people would consider what I did a proper justice, that’s all.”

“Tell yourself that all you want. The truth will come out,” Otto replied. His eyes were drawn to a sudden movement above the boatman. A large leaded window on the southern side on the bridge exploded outwards, thousands of glass shards tumbling through the air, accompanied by the falling figure of a man. He plunged towards the boat and clattered into Punt’s back, sending the boatman sprawling into the cut. The fallen man landed nimbly on his feet, glass still raining down around him. Otto arched an eyebrow at the new arrival. “If you’re trying to make a strong first impression, you’ve succeeded.”

“I was trying to stay alive. Everything after that’s a bonus. The

name's Schnell, Kurt Schnell. I'm the new watch captain for Three Penny Bridge."

Otto pointed up at the shattered window of the tavern, where a handful of men were shouting abuse and making obscene gestures at Kurt. "Not quite established your authority yet, I notice."

Kurt grinned and offered a hand of friendship to Otto. "You must be the local Priest of Morr."

"I don't usually touch the living," Otto replied.

Kurt withdrew his hand. "Of course-but you have a name, haven't you?"

"Otto."

"Then I am in your debt, Otto. Landing in your boat saved me the embarrassment of drowning."

"You live in Marienburg, a city surrounded in all ways by water, and you can't swim?"

Kurt shrugged. "Not much call for it where I came from."

Otto frowned, before plunging his right hand into the water beside the boat. After feeling around underwater for several seconds, he pulled Punt's head above the surface. The boatman gasped and gurgled, murky water gushing from his mouth. "It seems my pilot is equally unskilled in matters aquatic. Perhaps you could help me get him back on board, since it was your arrival that pitched him into the water?" Together Otto and Kurt managed to manhandle Punt back into the boat, the boatman protesting all the way. Otto navigated the vessel to the nearest mooring, beside a stone staircase that led up from the cut on the Stoessel side of the water. Kurt was first onto dry land, followed by Otto. Punt opted to stay in his boat.

"Much as I hate the water, I'd rather be nearly half-drowned in it than spend another minute in your company," he told the priest. "No offence, mind."

Otto turned away and marched up the stairs, all too used to the fearful reactions his presence brought among those unused to being around the dead and the dying. Kurt followed him until they emerged on to a minor passageway near the Three Penny Bridge. At the top of the stone steps, Kurt put a hand on the priest's shoulder, to stop him moving away. "Your temple-is it far from here?"

"It's along this alleyway, less than a hundred paces from the bridge. Why do you ask?"

"I'd like to come and see you there."

The priest's eyes narrowed. "Few enter a Temple of Morr willingly, even in times of necessity. Why should you wish to visit me?"

Kurt smiled. "Let's say I have a proposition for you. But first I've got a crowd to control." He marched away, towards Three Penny

Bridge. Otto watched him go, intrigued by the new arrival. Kurt Schnell was either the bravest of men, or the most foolish-time would reveal which was the more accurate description. But the priest was more interested by the newcomer's presence. Schnell was a man steeped in blood, with the lives and deaths of many borne on his shoulders. Death followed him, a spectre waiting for the next corpse to fall, the next soul to be claimed. Otto grimaced. He would be busy in the days to come. Kurt strode back to Three Penny Bridge to find Scheusal slumped on the cobbles and a battered, bleeding Narbig kneeling beside two unconscious thugs from the tavern. Gulls wheeled overhead, their cries like mocking laughter to Kurt's ears. The rest of the watchmen were standing around laughing and sniggering their voices echoing the sound of the gulls. Kurt got his recruits' attention by picking up one of the senseless thugs and returning him to the Abandon Hope Tavern, propelling the body back through the entrance at indecent speed. "Who can tell me what just happened?" Kurt asked once his men were listening.

"You got seven kinds of snot kicked out of you," Bescheiden sneered triumphantly.

"Exactly," Kurt agreed, enjoying the look of surprise on the craven coward's face. "That's what happens unless we work as a team, supporting one another. Together we can reclaim this place for the decent people of Marienburg. But if we stand divided, we'll be crushed."

Raufbold stepped boldly forward from among the other watchmen, his usual cocky arrogance having recovered from the earlier humiliation. "I thought we were supposed to watch and learn. All we saw was you being made a fool, forced to jump out a window to save your sorry neck."

Kurt bit his tongue to stop himself replying harshly, knowing his accuser was right, no matter how painful that realisation might be. Hubris was never easy to accept, but Kurt was determined not to let the others see how much his pride had been hurt, how much his confidence had been shaken. He needed help and advice, someone he already trusted to help him win round this motley collection of reprobates-and he knew exactly where to find that someone. "I promise you all this: before the end of the day, that building will be a watch station once more." Again they laughed at him, jeering at his boastful words. Kurt let them laugh, waiting for their hilarity to fade before speaking once more. "I'm going to get help. Until I return, I want you all to remain here and make sure none of the people inside the tavern leave. They must be held accountable for their actions in attacking members of the watch. An example needs to be made of them."

“Why in the name of Sigmar’s sausage should we stay?” Bescheiden demanded.

Kurt smiled. “If any of you is missing when I return, you’ll be charged with desertion of duty and sentenced to twenty-eight days on Rijker’s Isle-and you all know how the inmates there like to treat convicted members of the watch, don’t you?” The men grumbled and muttered under their breath. Watchmen were considered fair game on Rijker’s Isle, guards looking the other way when the inmates gathered to extract some measure of vengeance for having been jailed by the Black Caps. Again, Kurt waited for silence before continuing. “I was promised my recruits would be the best of the best Marienburg has to offer, but it looks like I’ve been sent the worst of the worst. Other stations have dumped you here with me, so we’re stuck with each other. Either we make this work, or else we all suffer the consequences. Think about that while I’m gone.” Jan Woxholt was enjoying his third ale of the afternoon when Kurt strode into the Dancing Pirate. The warm, well-kept tavern was popular with halflings from nearby Kleinmoot ward, making the big, blond and bearded figure at the rear of the taproom all the more obvious. Kurt strode across the half-empty tavern and stood in front of Jan’s table. “Still drinking Hoornweg’s Old Inscrutable, I see.”

“How did you…?”

Kurt ran a finger across his top lip. “The ale stains the bottom of your moustache black.”

Jan wiped his whiskers dry with the back of one hand, while offering the other in friendship. Kurt shook it gratefully and sat down opposite him. “I hear you’ve gone up in the world,” Jan said. “Watch captain, no less-and given your own station, too.”

“How did you-” Kurt began.

“I notice things too,” Jan interrupted. “And I hear more. You were a fool to take the job.”

“It’s the chance of a lifetime-”

“It’s a chance to get yourself killed,” Jan insisted, “you and anybody else stupid enough to get involved. Everyone knows Three Penny Bridge station is cursed, Kurt. You may not believe in such things, but I do. I knew the last captain there, Joost Holismus-he was a good man, until Chaos claimed him, one of the best thief-takers in all of Marienburg. Don’t let that place claim you, too.”

Kurt smiled. “I take it that’s a roundabout way of saying you won’t help me.”

Jan took a deep drink from his tankard. “You haven’t asked me yet.”

“Will you help?”

Jan drained his tankard dry and stood up, getting ready to leave.

“I’m sorry, Kurt-really, I am.”

Kurt grabbed Jan’s right wrist. “Why? I’ve never known you to be afraid of anything. You saved me from myself more times than I can remember when I first joined the Watch. Without you, I’d never have survived a week in this city. I need your help again, Jan.”

“I’m retired,” the big man said quietly. “Those days are behind me.”

“They don’t have to be-”

“I’m scared!” Jan hissed, ripping his arm free of Kurt’s grasp. “Is that what you wanted to hear? I’m scared of that place-and you should be too. I’m one of the few men in the Watch who has stayed alive long enough to retire. I saved sufficient coins to keep me in ale and sausages for a good few years yet-more than long enough. All I want is a quiet life, Kurt. Can’t you leave me be, let me enjoy my last days in peace?”

Kurt stood, moving to block his old friend’s exit. “Is that what you want? Truly?”

Jan couldn’t meet his gaze. “It will have to do.”

“It doesn’t need to,” Kurt insisted. “I’m offering you the chance to make a difference, to change the way things are in this city for the better. Isn’t that worth the risk?”

“You don’t know what you’re asking.”

“Then make me understand!”

“I can’t.” Jan folded his beefy arms and glared at his former protйgй. “Now, are you going to let me pass, or do I have to pitch you out of a window into the canal?”

Kurt couldn’t help smiling. “You heard about that too?”

“I told you-I notice things, and I hear more.” Jan stepped closer, his face like stone. “Well?”

Kurt stared into his friend’s eyes, searching for answers. “I can’t believe you won’t help.”

“If it was any other place in the city, I would-but not there. Not now.” Jan sighed. “You’d be better off rejoining the army than trying to reclaim Three Penny Bridge.”

“I can’t do that, and I can’t go home to Altdorf either-not without proving myself here first. This is my chance to do that,” Kurt said.

“Then you haven’t got much choice, have you? You’ll have to find a way of drinking from this poisoned chalice the commander has given you-but you’ll have to do it without me.”

“I never thought I’d see you like this, Jan-never thought you’d be afraid of anything. I guess I was wrong.” Kurt stood aside to let his friend pass, but called out as Jan reached the tavern door. “If you change your mind, you know where I’ll be, don’t you?” The burly blond man paused, but did not reply before marching out of the

taproom, the heavy door swinging shut behind him. As Kurt strode back to Three Penny Bridge, he went over and over the conversation with Jan in his mind. The retired sergeant had the stamina of a bull and a physique to match the strongest of stevedores, along with a beguiling honesty and rare courage. I could have done with a few more men like him at my side in the army, Kurt had often thought. How dearly he wished Jan would join him at the new station. He hadn't realised how much he missed their conversations, the presence of the big man at his side, two friends shoulder to shoulder against all ills and evils. Taking back Three Penny Bridge would be challenge enough with Jan as his right-hand man. Without Jan, Kurt doubted he had any chance of succeeding as acting captain. It was enough to drive any man to drink, but that was how he'd ended up in Marienburg, a drunken wreck with a one-way ticket to the end of the Reik.

Kurt was accosted by a hefty woman while he marched across Stoessel. She stepped into his path, her considerable bulk blocking the passageway. "I need to make a confession," the wide-hipped woman whispered.

"Find yourself a priest."

"I need to confess a crime," she insisted, her eyes glancing up at his black cap.

"Fine," Kurt said, folding his arms impatiently. "What's your name?"

"Gerta Gestehen."

"And what crime did you commit?"

"Theft. I picked the pocket of an important citizen."

Kurt looked her up and down, deciding she was the least likely pickpocket he'd ever encountered. There was more to this woman than met the eye-a lot more, judging by her size. "What did you steal?"

Gerta stared at him as if he was mad. "I'm not going to tell you that."

"You want to confess a crime, but you don't want to tell me the details?" Kurt frowned. Something was nagging at the back of his thoughts. He knew he'd never met this woman before, but she seemed all too familiar. "Have you got someone who can speak on your behalf? A husband, perhaps?"

"My Engelbert's still on Rijker's Isle, where people like you sent him so unjustly three years ago. But Engelbert is not my husband, he's my lover."

"I see. So, whose pocket did you pick, precisely?"

"I didn't ask his name, but he had pointy ears, long blond hair and thin, delicate features."

“Sounds like an elf.”

Gerta smiled. She moved closer, so her magnificent bosom pressed against Kurt. “If I stole from an elf, would that get me sent to Rijker’s Isle too? Perhaps I could share a cell with Engelbert.”

Kurt sighed in exasperation as realisation struck home. “What did you say your name was?”

“Gerta-Gerta Gestehen.”

“Also known as Gerta the Blurter?”

The obese woman took a step back, her face stricken with horror. “I resent that name, and all it implies! I’ve never made a false confession in my life!”

Kurt rolled his eyes. Gerta was all but a legend among the Black Caps, a serial confessor who would claim the blame for almost any crime in the vain hope it would get her reunited with her alleged lover. “Confessing to picking the pocket of an elf-isn’t that going over the top, even for you, Gerta?”

She scowled at him. “You’re saying you don’t believe me?”

“I’m saying you’re wasting my time. Waste any more of it and-”

“You’ll send me to Rijker’s?” she panted, her eyes lighting up.

“-and I’ll have you spend next Marktag in the stocks outside the Suiddock fish market. Got it?”

“But I don’t like fish,” Gerta protested.

“All the more reason to stay away from me,” Kurt snapped. “Now, move!” He pushed past the still protesting woman, ignoring her cries for attention.

“But I can even describe what the elf was wearing,” Gerta called after him. “He had a deep green tunic, and his skin was like alabaster. I heard him whispering something under his breath!”

Kurt kept going, eager to get away from her deranged rantings. He was still fuming when he strode straight into Bescheiden, a few streets from Three Penny Bridge. “You’ll pay tuppence and a sword for leaving your post,” Kurt promised, “unless you’ve a good explanation.”

The weasel-faced man blanched at the threat, but stood his ground. “I came looking for you. A body’s been found near the bridge, half in and half out of the Bruynwarr.”

“So? Floaters turn up all the time in this city,” Kurt sighed. “Families too cheap or too poor to pay for a mausoleum plot wait until dark, before lobbing the dearly departed off one of the bridges.”

Bescheiden nodded. “Yes, but this one’s an elf-high born, from the sounds of it, important. He’s been murdered and he didn’t go quietly, according to what people are saying.”

“An elf?” Kurt’s mind rebelled at the coincidence. “Do you know what clothes he was wearing?”

“A deep green tunic, I think.”

Kurt closed his eyes and ran a rough hand across the stubble on his jaw line. So, Gerta’s unlikely tale might have actually had some tiny fraction of truth hidden buried within her delusions and lies. It was doubtful she had slain the elf, but the serial confessor might have seen who did-and Kurt had just ignored her wild claims. This day was going from bad to worse, and far too quickly for his liking. The humiliation at headquarters, having to take evasive action to survive his foolhardy attempt at reclaiming the station and Jan’s refusal to help-now this. Elves had their own enclave within Marienburg and stayed there whenever possible, not mixing with the humans, halflings and other races found on the city’s streets and waterways. Seeing an elf outside their quarter was a rarity. Most citizens of Marienburg could go their whole lives without catching sight of one.

Little was known about the elves, beyond the fact they were long-lived and had abilities beyond those of mortal men. The murder of an elf was all but unheard of, and certainly had not happened outside the walls of the elf quarter during Kurt’s time in Marienburg. Such a crime would doubtless create a political firestorm among the city’s ruling elite and no end of trouble for everyone involved, until the culprit was found and delivered to the elves for punishment. There was only one thing that could yet rescue this situation for Kurt. “The body-where was it found?”

“Riddra, at the bottom of the steps between the Gentlemen’s Club and the Stevedores and Teamsters’ Guild headquarters,” Bescheiden replied.

“I meant was it in the water or out of the water?” There was a strict jurisdictional distinction between crimes committed on the water and those not. The former were known as wet crimes and got handled by the River Watch, while the latter-dry crimes-were the Black Caps’ responsibility. If at least half the elf’s body had been in the Bruynwarr when first discovered, Kurt and his men could avoid the thankless task of trying to find out who had dared to kill the victim.

Bescheiden shook his head. “Sorry, captain-he only had one foot in the water.” Kurt spat out a curse so vile it made his watchman take a step backwards. Bescheiden grinned. “And you thought you had trouble before, eh? The commander’s cronies will be all over this like Fen Loonies on a boatload of lost travellers.”

“Sounds like you need some help,” a familiar voice boomed from behind Kurt. He turned to see Jan strolling towards him, wearing the black cap of a watchman. The rest of his garb was not so well fitting, the tunic straining to encompass Jan’s broad chest and broader belly. Kurt couldn’t help but smile at the sight of his friend, back in uniform once more. He embraced Jan warmly, clapping him on the back.

“I thought you were retired?”

Jan shrugged. “Much as I love drinking in the Dancing Pirate, the company of halflings and half-wits is not enough to pass the time, even for someone so easily amused as me. Besides, we’ve all got to die of something, yes? It might as well be stopping you getting yourself killed.”

“None of my men are getting killed on Three Penny Bridge,” Kurt vowed.

A shadow passed over Jan’s face. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep.” He noticed the craven presence of Bescheiden lurking nearby. “This one of your men, is it?”

Kurt nodded and rolled his eyes. “Wait until you meet the rest.”

Jan laughed. “Nothing’s ever easy with you, is it Kurt? Or should I call you sir now?”

“Captain will do fine.”

“Captain it is. Now, what’s this I hear about a murdered elf on your territory?”

“How did you-” Bescheiden began.

“Don’t even bother asking,” Kurt said, cutting him short. “Sergeant Woxholt has the best network of informants in all of Marienburg, isn’t that right?”

Jan shrugged. “Live here long enough, you know everything and everyone. What’s first, captain?”

“Bescheiden, I want you to find Gerta Gestehen and bring her to the station-she may have seen who killed the elf, or at least witnessed the body being dumped.” The small man nodded and hurried away.

“You can’t trust a word she says,” Jan warned.

“Perhaps not, but if she does know anything about the murderer, that makes her a target too. The dead elf can wait for the moment-barring a miracle cure or magical intervention, I doubt he’s going anywhere anytime soon,” Kurt said. “We need to reclaim our station before we start solving murders.” Martin Faulheit was one of the laziest men in Marienburg. He had joined the Black Caps because it seemed to offer the best pay for the least amount of work or responsibility. He had slouched from one station to another, doing just enough to keep his uniform but never any more. Asked to work a moment longer than his shift and it was probably more than Faulheit’s job was worth. Ask him to risk danger, dismemberment or death, and that was definitely more than his job was worth. His apathetic attitude extended to his personal appearance too: receding hair scraped over a balding pate with a handful of goose grease, a paunch built by excesses of eating and ale that slumped over the waist-belt of his rarely washed uniform, and breath that stank worse than any canal at low tide, because he couldn’t be bothered to clean his teeth. The sole

reason Faulheit sported a beard and moustache was it saved him the effort of shaving. He wasn't actively corrupt-he wasn't actively anything, except lazy-but Faulheit was willing to take a bribe if it saved him from having to arrest anyone or put himself in any danger.

In all his time with the Black Caps, only one man had ever managed to frighten Faulheit into an honest day's work. When that man appeared on Three Penny Bridge with the new captain, the pair of them acting like old friends, Faulheit felt his heart sinking lower than any catacomb in the city. "Taal's teeth!" he hissed, panic spreading across his ugly features. "Not him! Not here!"

Raufbold was preening nearby, but still noticed the consternation. "What's the matter?"

"It's Sergeant Woxholt," Faulheit replied. "Our glorious leader's gone and got Sergeant Woxholt."

The colour drained from the cocksure face of Raufbold. "But he's retired-I heard he'd retired."

"Looks like he's retired from being retired."

Raufbold spat out a colourful curse before snapping to attention. The other watchmen all laughed at his sudden change in attitude-until they saw Woxholt approaching. One by one, they assumed the same upright stance, even Faulheit. When the captain and his sergeant reached them on the centre of the bridge, all the Black Caps were in line, their uniforms straightened, their attitudes all but unrecognisable.

"I think they saw you coming," Kurt said, smiling broadly. "They must recognise you, Jan!"

Faulheit felt the sergeant's eyes sweeping across the gathering piercing as the beam from a lighthouse on a moonless night. The flabby watchman closed his eyes, trying to wish himself invisible, but it did no good. Woxholt spotted him and laughed uproariously.

"Faulheit! Faulheit, is that you?" the big man's voice boomed.

"Answer the sergeant," Kurt commanded.

"Yes, sir," Faulheit said, his voice little more than a whisper.

"What was that, Faulheit? My hearing's not as good as it used to be," Woxholt bellowed.

"Yes, sir!"

Woxholt moved closer to his target, a grim smirk of satisfaction on his features. "What did you call me, Faulheit, you disgusting worm of a man?"

"Sir. I called you sir, sir." Faulheit found himself snapping into a salute for no explicable reason.

"I'm not a sir, I'm a sergeant!" Woxholt roared, his voice like a blast of hot wind as the words passed the fat watchman's face, blowing the greasy bangs back from his eyes. "You can call Captain

Schnell sir, if that's what he wants, but you call me sergeant! Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sergeant," Faulheit whimpered.

"I can't hear you!"

"Yes, sergeant!"

"That's better." Woxholt slowly marched back and forth along the assembled line of watchmen, sighing and shaking his head sadly. "Dear, oh dear, oh dear. What have we got here? Probably the worst selection of miscreants and maladjusted wastrels ever to disgrace the uniform of the watch! Would-be heroes, sallow-faced freaks, blood-lusting bullies, bastards, backstabbers and lethargic lunatics-I doubt there's one good watchman among the lot of you! Am I right?" None of the much berated band of men dared speak. "I asked you lot a question! Am I right about you?"

"Yes, sergeant," a few of them replied, weakly.

"You'll have to speak up!"

"Yes, sergeant!" They were bellowing as one now, even Faulheit finding his blood boiling with anger, a red mist of fury descending over his senses.

"That's right. Now, I'm certain that all you deserve to be sent to this hole, but I'm just as certain that Captain Schnell doesn't. He tried to set an example and most of you cowards didn't have the guts to follow his lead. Well, this time you don't have a choice. Together, we're going into that tavern and we're going to rid the place of every piece of scum inside who isn't wearing the uniform of a Black Cap. Does anybody have any objections to that?"

Faulheit meekly raised his left hand. "Err, sergeant…?"

Woxholt snorted derisively before stomping across to him. "Yes? What is it?"

Now sweating like a stuck pig, Faulheit clutched at his heart. "I'm not feeling well. I think I need to see an apothecary, before my heart gives out completely."

Woxholt grinned. "Is that a fact? Well, then there isn't a moment to lose, is there? You can go."

"You mean… I can leave?"

"Not exactly. You can go first-you can lead us into the tavern."

"But I didn't-"

"Didn't want all the glory for yourself? Don't worry, Faulheit, the others will be right behind you."

Faulheit swallowed hard. I should know better than to open my mouth, he thought. It's always more trouble than my job's worth. By Manann, it was more trouble than my life's worth.

"Off you go," Woxholt said, gesturing towards the open doors of the former station on the opposite side of the bridge. "Show us how a

real man marches towards near certain death." Faulheit glanced beseechingly towards Captain Schnell, but found no sympathy there. Reluctantly pulling his club out of its sheath, the bloated Black Cap tiptoed towards the tavern. "Move!" Woxholt bellowed. "All of you, move!"

Faulheit heard someone else shouting a war cry as he charged in through the double doors. The strange thing was, he recognised the voice-it was his own. Kurt remained outside while Jan and the new recruits went into battle for possession of the Abandon Hope Tavern. After a few minutes of fists smacking against flesh, the sounds of furniture breaking and men crying out in pain, the sergeant reappeared, smiling broadly. "Shouldn't be long now," he reported. The unconscious body of Abram Cobbius came flying out of a first floor window and landed with a sickening thud on the cobbles. Scheusal leaned out the window from where Cobbius had departed and shook an angry fist down at the fallen figure. Kurt and Jan couldn't help laughing at the spectacle.

"Of course, we loosened it for you," Kurt said as the sounds of fighting slowly diminished.

"You loosened it?"

Kurt jerked a thumb towards the tavern. "Think of that place as a large jar of pickled herring that you can't get the lid off. I loosened it by going in there earlier. Between us, Scheusal, Narbig and I took out most of the thugs inside. If we'd had a few more men backing us at the time, the job would've been done there and then. You and the new recruits had it easy this time. We loosened it for you."

"If you say so, captain."

Kurt clapped his friend on the back. "One question-when did your uniform get so tight?"

Jan shrugged. "Must have shrunk in the wash."

"Must have done," Kurt agreed. "Thank you for coming to help me."

Jan's smile faded. "Remember that, when this is over-when you know the price of my help." Kurt was about to ask a question, but the sound of Faulheit screeching for help from inside the tavern took Jan's attention. "Go and look at this murdered elf, while I help the men mop up inside. By the time you get back, we should have reclaimed the Three Penny Bridge station. That's when our troubles really start."

CHAPTER FIVE

To an outside observer, Marienburg was seemingly run and controlled by the Stadsraad, a parliament of elected representatives. To most of those living within Marienburg, the Stadsraad was controlled by the Ten-ten families who owned the city's most wealthy merchant houses. To those who dealt with crimes both wet and dry in Marienburg, the city was run and controlled by two organisations-the Stevedores and Teamsters Guild, and those who gathered at the Marienburg Gentlemen's Club. That both of these groups should have their headquarters on Riddra, the smallest island in the Suiddock district was unlikely. The fact both buildings should stand adjacent to each other was too unlikely to be a coincidence.

During his time in the city, Kurt had rarely encountered the true power of the guild. Its members controlled each and every piece of cargo that came into or departed the docks of Marienburg. In the greatest trading city of the Old World, that control represented an immensely powerful weapon. Almost all of the Empire's imports and exports flowed through Marienburg, therefore the guild could paralyse the rest of the Empire if it so chose. The power of the stevedores and teamsters was absolute on the docks. Once out at sea, vessels became tempting prizes for pirates and wreckers. But most captains preferred their chances at sea to the tyranny of the guild.

Stevedores and teamsters held the docks in a merciless grip, but those who gathered at the nearby Marienburg Gentleman's Club profited from every crime in the city. It was the nerve centre of all illegality, home to the League of Gentlemen Entrepreneurs, an organisation more commonly and simply known as the League.

It was the guild for thieves, smugglers and robbers, a union for criminals and their masters. The League arbitrated disputes between rival gangs and made sure everyone concentrated on their true purpose: profiting from the misery and vices of others. Kurt may have hailed from Altdorf, but as a Black Cap he knew all too well about the extent of the League's grasp upon life within Marienburg. But he had never had cause before today to venture on to Riddra, let alone stand on the steps that passed between the headquarters of these two powerful organisations en route to the water's edge of the Bruynwarr.

The two buildings offered a stark contrast. The League's home resembled little more than a modest, two-storey tavern, squatting on the southern side of Riddra, complete with tiled roof and slightly shabby exterior. A casual observer could little imagine the power that was wielded by those who gathered within those walls. By comparison, the guild headquarters was a lavish building.

An innocent mind would find it incongruous for an organisation of supposedly humble dockworkers to boast such an opulent structure, every level of the building larger and more ornately decorated than the last. As Kurt approached the scene of the crime, he studied the two buildings, looking for faces at the windows or some hint that those within knew about the corpse found so close by. But nobody appeared interested in peering out, and certainly the residents of Riddra had no intention of coming near this place. The curious were not long-lived around these cobbled streets and passageways.

Two figures were at the top of the stairs, but they kept apart from each other, like a pair of strangers waiting for the next ferry across the Rijksweg. The one on the left was dressed in a black cloak, the hood drawn back to reveal a hairless scalp.

Kurt couldn't see their faces yet, but he had little doubt it must be Otto, the priest of Morr he had met earlier. The other person was also wearing a cloak, but cut from a different cloth and dark of hue. They had the hood up, hiding their features from Kurt's gaze as he got closer. As he watched, the hooded figure crouched down, staring intently at something near the top of the steps. Kurt quickened his pace, moving from a brisk walk into a run. "Don't touch that!" he called out.

"I wasn't planning to," a woman's voice replied. Gloved hands pulled back the hood to reveal a mass of chestnut hair and the familiar, smiling face of Belladonna Speer.

"You again," Kurt said. "I suppose the commander sent you. That didn't take him long."

She stood up and removed her gloves. "Actually, I'm here on your behalf."

"I don't understand."

Belladonna offered the hand of friendship to him. "I volunteered to join your station. I'm one of the recruits assigned to Three Penny Bridge." When Kurt did not shake her hand, she sighed and withdrew it. "Let me guess-you've never worked alongside a woman before, you don't believe I'm up to the job and you're worried I'm going to get myself into some sort of trouble-either with the other recruits or a criminal-that will cause problems for you and your ambitions for the station. Correct?"

"Well…" Kurt said. "Yes. And I'm not sure whether we have… err… facilities for women."

"I'm sure we can find a way around that," she replied. "Give me until this time tomorrow to prove myself. If you're not satisfied I'll be an asset to the station, I'll get myself transferred back to headquarters or somewhere else, out of your way."

"I'll have to think about it."

Belladonna shook her head, nostrils flaring in frustration. “Fine, you do that. In the meantime, I want to get a closer look at the bottom of these steps.”

“Don’t touch the body,” Otto warned as she approached the top of the staircase.

“I wasn’t planning to. That’s your domain, not mine.” She stomped off down the stone steps.

“Quite a temper she has,” Otto observed dryly. “Her own worst enemy, no doubt.”

“That’s true of almost everyone,” Kurt replied.

“Not of me,” the priest said.

Kurt let that pass. “How did you hear about the murder?”

“As a servant of Morr, I am attuned to such things.”

“Ahh.”

“And I overhead a fat woman bragging outside my window about her involvement with the murder of an elf. She described where the victim was, so I came to administer what aid I could.”

“Gerta the Blurter strikes again.”

Otto frowned. “You mean she’s killed before?” Kurt explained about the woman’s confessional tendencies. “A sad case,” the priest decided. “So powerful a love, separated from its inspiration.”

“Actually, I’ve heard Gerta’s alleged lover can’t stand the woman. I wouldn’t be surprised if he let himself be caught in the hope of being sent to Rijker’s Isle, just so he could escape her attentions.”

Otto shrugged. “I know little of such matters. My devotion is to Morr and the ways of death.”

“You’ve examined the body?”

“Not closely, but well enough to confirm the dead elf was murdered-a wrongful killing.”

“All murders are wrongful killings.”

Otto pursed his lips. “Perhaps by definition, but I’ve found there is an infinity of possibilities in such matters. Murder may be a wrongful killing but not all wrongful killings are murder.”

“If you say so,” Kurt sighed. “How was he slain?”

The priest pressed his fingers together in a steeple shape in front of his chest. “That I cannot say.”

“Why? Is that the sort of thing you can only confide to the family? Or do you need more time with the body to be certain of your conclusions?”

“You misunderstand me,” Otto said before pointing down the steps. “That poor soul was slain in a way I’ve never observed before. An animal was involved, but also a blade and possibly other weapons as well. The vocal chords were ripped apart by claws, in an attack of inhuman savagery-but the decision to sever them suggests

intelligence, reasoning, an attempt to stop the victim crying out for help. I believe that was one of the first wounds inflicted, perhaps the second. After that, the murderer took their time, savouring the slaughter. This was a celebration, a testing of strength almost. Whoever committed this atrocity will certainly kill again. They have a taste for it now."

Kurt stared at the priest in disbelief. "And you saw all this from a brief examination of the body?"

"One brief examination of this body, and a lifetime spent studying death and dying."

"Point taken. Well, time I had a look at this dead elf for myself." Kurt moved towards the steps but felt a hand on his shoulder, holding him back. He turned to look at the priest inquiringly.

"You should give her a chance," Otto said quietly. "I know a little about Belladonna Speer. She studied our ways for a time, before choosing a different path. That young woman knows much that is considered arcane or uncanny by most of your kind. Her attitude may be irksome, but she would be a valuable asset for your station." Otto released his surprisingly strong grip on Kurt's shoulder.

"I'll bear that in mind." Belladonna was standing astride the dead body, studying a droplet of blood on the stone wall to one side of the corpse, when she heard Kurt coming down to join her. "Don't step in that pool of blood on the fifth step up from the water," she warned, not bothering to look up at him.

"What pool of-" Kurt's voice was stopped by a sickly squelch. "Ahh. That pool of blood."

Belladonna shook her head. "Why do Black Caps always insist on walking through the evidence, thereby destroying clues that might help them catch the culprits?"

"You're a Black Cap too, remember?"

"I was generalising," she replied, before pointing at the bloodspot on the wall. "I don't think that came from a human being. Some kind of animal, possibly, but certainly not from a human."

"You've got a dead elf beneath you. Perhaps he was the source," Kurt said.

"Sarcasm is the poor man's wit," Belladonna observed.

"You would do well to remember I am your superior, at least in rank."

She smiled, despite herself. "Sorry, Captain Schnell."

"So am I," he admitted. "My first day and a dead elf on my watch-hardly an auspicious start."

"Well, if it's any comfort, our friend here's been dead longer than you've had your promotion. His body temperature suggests he's been here since before dawn."

“Wouldn’t the tide have affected that?”

“Normally, yes, but the body was dumped down here as the tide was going out. Whoever put this corpse here wanted it found by the Black Caps, not the River Watch.”

Kurt grunted unhappily. “You said it was dumped here-but not killed here?”

Belladonna gestured around them. “There’d be much more blood. This elf fought for his life, he didn’t die willingly. This was murder, have no doubt of that.”

“Otto said much the same.”

“Well, he would know, wouldn’t he?” When Kurt didn’t reply, she looked up to find him staring at her. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“He was right about you-you see things other people don’t. Why is that?”

Belladonna shrugged. “To me, a case like this, it’s a puzzle, an enigma waiting to be solved.”

Kurt smiled. “What else can you tell me about this enigma, then?”

She stepped aside, to afford him a better view of the corpse. The elf was blanched white, his face a mask of pain and torment. The throat was a mess of rips and shreds, while the abdomen had suffered even more damage. The hands were just as brutalised, skin hanging from bleak, white bones. Curiously, one finger pointed up towards the sky-or perhaps towards the two buildings that overlooked the corpse. “This body wasn’t so much dumped here as carefully posed. Notice how one foot extends downwards, towards the water’s edge? That would have muddied the jurisdictional issues, depending upon when the corpse was found. The hands show the elf fought back, even unto death. The throat-”

“Severed to stop him crying out,” Kurt interjected.

“Very good,” Belladonna said admiringly.

“Otto told me.”

“Ahh.” She pointed at the abdomen. “There’s two sets of wounds there. The major damage was done by something jagged and savage. But the underlying wounds look like they were done by a blade, not expertly handled either. Someone hacked about for a while in there.”

“So the second wounds were designed to conceal the first attack?”

“It’s possible,” she conceded.

Kurt’s brow furrowed. “Were the initial wounds fatal?”

“They were mortal wounds-but not necessarily fatal. I’d need to know more about the bodies of elves before I could give a definitive answer on that. It’s Otto’s area of speciality, not mine. To be honest, I’m more interested in what’s around the body, what that tells us.”

“And the pointing finger?”

“Someone is sending a message to the Guild or the League-or

possibly both. Whoever put this body here knew the presence of those organisations so close by meant the corpse would not be found straight away. They also knew we wouldn't have the benefit of any witnesses to help us."

"Well, they were wrong about that much, at least," Kurt muttered to himself. He gestured at the body. "Are you done here? I'd like Otto to have a closer look at the remains, see what else he can find."

"It's best if he takes it to his temple for that. Once news reaches the elf quarter about what's happened here, this case will be taken out of your hands and so will the body."

"You know your politics," Kurt said appreciatively.

"Three years working under the commander, you pick up a thing or two. I can help Otto transport the body, if you wish. Priests of Morr are stronger than they look, but even he would struggle to shift a dead elf across to Stoessel without anyone noticing."

"Agreed. I'll send him down." Kurt started back up the steps, taking them three at a time.

"Where are you going, in case we run into trouble?" Belladonna shouted after him.

"To pay a social visit on an important local resident."

"Who?"

"I think it's about time I introduced myself to Adalbert Henschmann!" Getting Abram Cobbius and his drunken thugs out of the Abandon Hope Tavern was relatively simple, once they'd been beaten unconscious. Persuading the women who plied their trade from the upper level was proving more problematic for Jan. All six of the women had barricaded themselves into the middle room at the front of the building, the side that faced out on to Three Penny Bridge. "You can't stay in there forever," Jan shouted through the heavy wooden door. "This was a watch station before you arrived and now it's going back to being a watch station again. That's no place for your sort of business."

"Maybe not, but we need a place to work," one of the women yelled back. "Find us somewhere else we can earn a crust, and you can have the room back. Until that happens, we stay where we are!"

"Have it your own way," Jan replied. He nodded to Scheusal and Narbig, whom he had sent out to fetch wooden planks, nails and two hammers. "You heard the ladies, they've decided to stay. Barricade the door to make sure they do." The two men set to work nailing planks across the door, sealing it shut so the women couldn't come and go via the station, even if they wanted to. When the noise of hammering finally ceased, the women demanded to know how they were supposed to get out. "We'll fetch you a rope ladder," Jan shouted back. "If you want to leave, you go out the window."

"What about our customers?"

Jan looked to the two watchmen for suggestions. "They have got a right to work, you know," Scheusal said, while Narbig remained silent.

"I guess any visitors you have can use the ladder too," Jan bellowed through the double barricade, "but only until we find you somewhere else. How does that sound?"

"It'll do!"

"Good! Well, that's settled, then." Jan folded his arms, feeling he'd been duped in some way.

"Hey, sergeant-what's your name?" the spokeswoman called out.

"Woxholt-Jan Woxholt. And you?"

"Molly."

"Molly what?"

There was a hollow laugh from the other side of the door. "We don't need a second name in our line of work, Sergeant Woxholt. Even if we had second names, nobody ever asks for them."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Jan's attention was taken by the sound of a woman's shouts drifting up from the ground floor. "Is that one of your girls?"

"No. We know better than to argue," Molly replied.

"You could've fooled me," Jan muttered to himself, before raising his voice. "She's probably here to see the captain. I'll have to make sure she doesn't leave before he returns. Afternoon to you, Molly."

"Same to you, I guess." Satisfied with the strange arrangement, Jan headed for the staircase. "Hey, sergeant!" Molly called, stopping Jan in his tracks. "I wanted to say-you're alright, for a Black Cap."

"You're welcome," he shouted back, before continuing on his way. Kurt stood outside the front door of the Marienburg Gentlemen's Club, unsure what to do. This was the nerve centre of all crime in the city, home to the dreaded Guild We've Never Heard Of, the headquarters for the League of Gentlemen Entrepreneurs. Should he march straight inside, or knock first and wait? Kurt decided discretion was the better part of valour and knocked three times, his knuckles rapping hard against the heavy wooden door. A small, metallic porthole opened in the door and a large, rheumy eye stared out at him. "What do you want here?" a gruff voice demanded.

"My name's Captain Schnell of the watch. I…" Kurt pondered his next words carefully, not wishing them to be his last. "I've come to pay my respects to Adalbert Henschmann."

"Casanova's busy at the moment," the doorman replied, laughing at some private joke.

"Really?" Kurt smiled. "I've sometimes heard your employer referred to by that nickname, but I understand nobody ever dares call

him that to his face. I'm sure he'd be interested to learn his doorman dares use it, let alone uttering it here of all places." Kurt glanced up to the first floor windows. "Perhaps I should shout out this revelation, I'm sure he could probably hear me from his private quarters."

"No, don't!" the doorman pleaded, his eye wide with panic. "I'll let you in, just don't tell him what I called him-please?" Bolts were hurriedly drawn back and the door swung inwards. Kurt strolled inside, a broad smile on his usually taciturn features.

"Let's keep it our little secret, hmm?" he offered, trying not to be startled by the black, empty socket where the doorman's right eye should have been. Kurt glanced around and was surprised to find the interior little different from any other taproom in Marienburg. The ceiling was low, the wooden floorboards were covered in spilled ale and sawdust, and a low fog of smoke choked the air.

A surly cluster of sour-faced miscreants gathered at tables, while a serving wench glared at Kurt from the bar, her clubbed hands wiping a pewter tankard with a grimy cloth. What little light there was came from a fireplace at the far end of the taproom, illuminating the few wooden doors that led into other parts of the building. A wooden staircase beckoned Kurt upwards. He took a step towards it but the doorman blocked the way. The one-eyed man was at least a head taller than Kurt and broad of build, but his hands clutched each other for comfort like those of a nervous father.

"Please, captain, you can't go up there-not yet."

"I've already said, I won't tell-"

"No, I mean you can't go up. Casa-" the doorman said, before clamping a hand over his own mouth in horror at saying the nickname again. "Henschmann is being entertained, at present."

Kurt sighed. "I see. And how long does his 'entertainment' usually take?"

"It's difficult to say, captain."

"Less time than it takes me to fill a tankard with ale," the serving wench interjected. "But he likes his visitor to stay with him most of the afternoon, to enhance his reputation with the ladies."

"Well, I haven't got all afternoon to wait," Kurt insisted. He pushed past the doorman and strode to the staircase. He was halfway up the creaking steps when another burly body blocked his progress. Kurt was confronted with the hefty, heavyset presence of a terrifyingly dour woman, her straw blonde hair tied in plaits that were bound in whirls on the sides of her head.

"You heard them downstairs," she sneered. "Nobody disturbs my master until he's ready."

"But I-"

"Nobody," the woman repeated, cracking the knuckles of one

hand inside another. She was twice Kurt's bodyweight, had forearms like hocks of ham and a broken nose. She also had the advantage of height over him, making it all but impossible to foresee an easy way past.

Kurt smiled. "Very well. Tell your master that I came to pay my respects, and that if he wishes-" The rest of his sentence was forgotten as the most stunning woman Kurt had ever seen emerged from a doorway behind the bodyguard. Her hair was dark as a moonless night, yet her pale skin had the quality of alabaster. The luscious red of her lips was matched by a corset of startling red silk that struggled to encompass her proud bosom. The rest of her dress was also silk, but black as the shining hair that framed her beautiful features. She blew a delicate kiss into the room from which she had just left, before walking towards the staircase, her face alive with humour and intelligence. The woman paused at the top of the steps, taking a moment to adjust her dйcolletage, a wry smile on her lips. Kurt had never seen this woman before, but her startling appearance and self possession left him in little doubt of her identity.

"Thank you, Helga," she said, her voice warm and low, like an early evening zephyr on a summer's night. "I believe Adalbert is ready to receive visitors now."

"Very good, Madame von Tiezer," the bodyguard growled, stepping aside to let the woman pass.

Kurt also moved aside for the courtesan, gently inclining his head to her as an acknowledgement. To his surprise, she paused beside him, the scent of musk and sweet perfume drifting into his nostrils like a sigh. "I don't believe we've met. My name is Diede," she whispered, offering her right hand. He took it in his and kissed the delicate knuckles, his eyes straining to take in her beauty.

"The pleasure is all mine," Kurt said, before introducing himself. She seemed intrigued.

"Any relation to Old Ironbeard Schnell?"

"He's my father." Kurt pondered the implications of her question. "You've met my father?"

Madame von Tiezer smiled. "Not in my professional capacity, no. But men of true courage and greatness are rare these days. I do my best to keep abreast of all notable arrivals in Marienburg. I'm surprised we haven't met before now."

"I was only made a captain this morning."

"And this afternoon you're coming to visit Adalbert?" She arched an eyebrow at him. "How delightful. I wish you well with your endeavours on the Three Penny Bridge, Captain Kurt Schnell. The task ahead of you is not easy, and the victory will not come without cost, but victory you shall win."

"How do you know-"

Madame von Tiezer pressed a finger against his lips to silence the question, while pressing the rest of her body closer to him. "A true courtesan is trained in many arts: she must sing, tell stories, listen well and speak less. Some of us also have other skills, second sight and the like. We will meet again, Captain Schnell, you may be certain of that." She removed her finger from his lips, the act so intimate Kurt felt himself close to blushing. Then she was gone, dancing down the steps with the grace of a ballerina.

Helga cleared her throat conspicuously to get Kurt's attention. When he looked up at her, she was gesturing impatiently for him to follow. "You coming or what?" Henschmann waited for Schnell in the League of Gentlemen Entrepreneurs' meeting room, a chamber sometimes mockingly referred to as the Directorate-the same title given to the city's executive council. As far as the crime lords were concerned, they were the true rulers of Marienburg. This was reflected in the meeting room's decor-a white marble floor, rich tapestries and curtains around the walls and windows, and a crystal chandelier that hung from the velvet-draped ceiling. Dominating the room was a long wooden table, its surface inlaid with gold swirls and curlicues. Ten matching chairs stood round the table, four down either side, and one at each end. Henschmann chose the chair at the far end of the room, opposite the door from the hallway. There was another door in the Directorate, but its existence was invisible to the naked eye and the opening mechanism known only to three living souls. The most powerful criminal in all of Marienburg waited patiently, his hands clasped together on the table, his expression utterly neutral.

The door swung open and Helga entered, her face sour as ever. "Captain Kurt Schnell, sir."

Henschmann observed the newcomer closely as he entered. Schnell appeared flushed, no doubt from a close encounter with Diede on her way out-how she loved to tease men with her femininity.

The Black Cap was younger than Henschmann had expected, though the piercing ice-blue eyes hinted at past horrors they had seen, and the shaven head suggested a man who brooked no opposition. The body appeared fit and trim, with a wiry rather than muscular build. No doubt Schnell had known sin in his time, but he was not its slave. Whatever vices the captain possessed, they did not command him. The set of his jaw, the way Schnell held himself, his ease in unknown surroundings-all spoke of a man who had fought his way up, a determined man who would not be easily swayed or intimidated. An interesting opponent, Henschmann concluded. If Schnell could not be turned, he would have to be crushed.

"Welcome to the Marienburg Gentlemen's Club," Henschmann

said, smiling broadly. “How can I be of service to you, Captain Schnell? Perhaps you’re interested in becoming a member?”

“I came to pay you my respects. Your name is known throughout the city, of course, but your business is strongest here in Suiddock. I felt it only right to introduce myself to you properly.”

Henschmann nodded his appreciation at this courtesy. “I understand you have plans to reopen the station on Three Penny Bridge?”

“The process is already underway,” Kurt agreed, his voice remaining neutral.

“I hope the reprobates who have been frequenting the abandoned building did not cause you too many difficulties?”

“None worth mentioning.”

“I’m gladdened to hear it.” Henschmann waited, but still Kurt did not ask for a bribe or create an opportunity for one to be offered. “No doubt it will be expensive to refit the interior of the station, since it has stood in neglect for so long. Perhaps my colleagues and I could make a contribution to the costs?” He produced a leather bag filled with gold coins and tossed them carelessly down onto the table. The pouch burst open, spilling its rich contents across the wooden surface, several of them rolling off the edge and coming to rest beside the visitor’s boots. “You’ll find that should more than cover any initial outlays you may have.”

The shadow of a sneer passed across Kurt’s features. “Again, I must politely decline your generous offer. The station must stand on its own two feet if it is to be a success in the mission I have planned for it.”

“Indeed? And what mission is this, if that’s not too bold a question?”

Kurt folded his arms. “Reclaiming Suiddock for decent people. Bringing the law back to these lawless streets and cobbles. Destroying the tyrannical grip of the Thieves’ Guild upon so much of this city, and driving out those who would make their money extorting, terrorising and murdering innocent citizens. Any who oppose us will go to Rijker’s Isle or find themselves dancing with Morr.”

Henschmann folded his arms too, mocking the visitor’s stance. “An impressive speech-you may even believe those goals are possible. But I fear for the safety of anyone who tries to enforce such a list of aims and objectives. I’ve heard the criminal element in this city can be quite merciless in the prosecution of their vendettas. Obviously, I know nothing of such matters, but I’ve heard whispers about such reprisals.”

“I’m sure you have-Casanova.”

Henschmann was up on his feet in an instant, his face livid with

anger. “What did you call me?”

“I understood that was the name most people commonly called you, something to do with your reputation as a ladies’ man. Of course, I don’t believe in such rumours. After all, why would a great lover need the services of a courtesan? Only someone too repulsive to find love without paying for it would resort to such methods to satisfy their carnal needs.”

The crime boss glared at Schnell, his nostrils flaring angrily as he fought to contain his temper. “Captain, I had been told you were an intelligent, thoughtful man who had risen through the Black Caps’ ranks by guile and cunning. I can see I was misinformed. That being the case, perhaps we should speak plainly to each other, as between men.”

“It would be my pleasure,” Kurt replied, all humour draining from his face.

“Continue on the path you have chosen and it will bring about your utter destruction. Not only will the station close before the end of Geheimnistag, but every soul within those walls shall have perished in the most exquisite agonies possible. You will be saved for last, giving you the opportunity to see your colleagues slain one by one before you join them in death,” Henschmann vowed.

“Should I consider those as threats?”

“Promises, Captain Schnell-consider them as promises.”

Kurt marched towards Henschmann, his face expressionless as granite. He stopped a few strides short of the crime boss, looking Henschmann up and down before speaking. “I fought in the war against Chaos. I’ve battled creatures beyond your worst nightmares and I’ve faced blood-sucking fiends in battle that would chill the marrow in your bones. If you believe the threats of a petty felon will shake my resolve, your intelligence reports about me are sadly lacking in depth or detail.” Kurt spat a mouthful of phlegm on the marble floor in front of Henschmann to emphasise his disdain.

Helga had been bristling with barely contained fury by the door during this exchange. Kurt’s insult was too much for her and she stormed round the table, ready to attack him. But Henschmann commanded her to stop with a simple gesture. The bodyguard returned to her position by the door, muttering threats of blood and violence under her breath. Henschmann smiled at Kurt. “You’ll have to excuse Helga, she lacks my sense of restraint in such matters.”

“Two steps closer and she would have been a dead woman,” Kurt replied.

Henschmann smile faded. “I think you’ve said enough for one visit, Captain Schnell. Regretfully, my hospitality to you must come to an end. Please remember what I said about the fate of the station on

Three Penny Bridge and all those assigned to it. It would be a shame to sacrifice the lives of so many upon the altar of your childish, impossible ambitions."

"The Black Caps are here to stay," Kurt vowed. "Get used to it-Casanova." The visitor turned on his heel and marched out, Helga close behind, leaving Henschmann still fuming in the meeting room. The commander of all crime in Marienburg waited until Schnell had left the building before smashing one of the gold inlaid chairs to splinters on the marble floor.

CHAPTER SIX

Kurt returned to the station but found his way in blocked by a steaming pile of pig heads sprawled across the entrance, and a woman descending from the first floor on a rope ladder. She had reached the cobbled street before noticing him or the captain's insignia on his tunic. "Did you order all these pig heads?" the woman demanded, pulling a mass of fiery red curls back from her face and tying them into a ponytail. "They're doing terrible things to our business, nobody'll come near the place!"

"Your business?"

"That's right. Customers don't want to visit me and my girls while the place stinks of dead meat."

"Well, I'll have to see what I can do about that," Kurt agreed, still trying to work out what the woman was doing descending by rope ladder from the first floor.

"I'd talk to that nice Sergeant Woxholt, but he's busy with Gerta the Blurter right now."

"Is he?"

"Yeah, he is. No idea where his boss, Captain Schnell, has gone, either." Kurt cleared his throat and tapped a finger against his insignia of office. The woman squinted at the symbols before retreating a step. "Oh! So, you'd be Captain Schnell then?" Kurt nodded, expecting the woman's attitude to change now she knew who she was talking to. It did, but for the worse. "In that case, can't you get these pig heads shifted, for the love of Shallya? I know there's a shortage of fresh meat thanks to the war, but we're trying to earn a living here, you know!"

"And I'm trying to reopen a watch station," he replied, finally losing patience with her tirades. "What is your name and why are you running a house of ill repute from my first floor office?"

"My name's Molly and because Sergeant Woxholt said we could."

"Did he know?"

"Yes!" She folded her arms obstinately. "You got a problem with us being here, you take it up with him, alright?" Having vented her anger, Molly marched back to the rope ladder and scrambled up to her first floor window. Before climbing inside, she lobbed a parting remark down to Kurt. "And don't forget about these bloody pig heads, while you're at it!"

Kurt counted to ten before yelling for his sergeant. Woxholt appeared outside a few seconds later, after climbing from a ground floor window. He ran to Kurt, his hands held out in supplication. "I know what you're going to say. I was busy with Gerta when the butchers dumped this lot outside. I've only just found out about it

myself. Give me twenty minutes and we'll have them shifted."

"And our female guests on the first floor?"

Jan rolled his eyes. "It's temporary, until we find them somewhere else to work, that's all."

"Why do we have to-" Kurt stopped himself, not wanting to get dragged any further into that conversation. "Never mind, I'm sure you had your reasons."

"I did," Jan agreed. His eyes flitted up to the centre window. "Which one did you talk to?"

"Molly. Quite a firebrand she was, too."

"What did she look like?" the sergeant asked innocently.

Kurt stared at Jan. "What did she look like?"

"I haven't seen her yet, we've only spoken through a barricaded door."

"What did she look like?" Kurt repeated, fury starting to engulf his voice.

Jan held up his hands. "Forget I even asked."

"Yes, let's."

Jan nodded. "So, would you like to take a tour of the station, meet the new recruits and see what we've got to work with? Everything's pretty much up and running now-"

"If you don't count the pig heads blocking the doors or Molly's girls plying their trade upstairs."

"Aside from those things, yes, everything else is pretty much up and running," Jan said soothingly.

Kurt shook his head despairingly. "Fine. Good. Give me the tour."

"Excellent." Jan turned to lead Kurt inside, before remembering the pile of porcine remnants. "We'll use that window over there for the moment, it leads into the old taproom. I was thinking that could become our main holding area, maybe turn the long bar into a reception desk."

"Sounds promising," Kurt said. "What about the pig heads?"

Jan nodded, before bellowing at the building. "Scheusal! Holismus! Get out here!" The big man from Bretonnia was first to emerge, climbing awkwardly out a window before hurrying over to stand at attention in front of his captain. Holismus was slimmer and perhaps a decade younger than Scheusal, but he moved no quicker, staggering several times before reaching them. His dirty blond hair hung forward over his pockmarked face, and the stench of stale ale was apparent on his breath. Jan sighed and shook his head before introducing the two men to Kurt. "I believe you met Scheusal earlier?"

Kurt shook Scheusal's hand, his own vanishing inside the big man's fist. "You fought well…?"

"Jacques, captain."

“You fought well, Jacques. Considering what some of the other captains have sent me, I’m surprised your last boss let you leave his station.”

“Captain Rottenrow said I was a troublemaker, because I got into a fight with another Black Cap.”

“I see. What was this fight about?” Scheusal looked away, apparently too ashamed to answer. “You can tell me, Scheusal. As far as I’m concerned, every man assigned to this station starts with a clean slate. Whatever mistakes you made in the past stay in the past. I’ll judge you by what you do here.”

“It was Raufbold. He kept making remarks about my accent, saying he couldn’t understand me.”

“Raufbold… Jorg Raufbold?” Kurt sighed. “The man who calls himself Gorgeous Jorg?”

“That’s the one.”

“So, Captain Rottenrow transferred both of you here, rather than trying to resolve the problem.” Scheusal shrugged helplessly. “Well, Jacques, it’s good to have you here,” Kurt said, smiling at the recruit. “With men like you backing me up, we can achieve great things here.”

“Yes, captain.”

Jan moved to stand beside the other watchman. “And this is Lothar Holismus.” The man in question snapped into a salute, but almost toppled over in the effort.

“Holismus-any relation to Joost Holismus, the last captain here?” Kurt asked.

“He was my elder brother,” Holismus slurred.

“Joost was one of the best thief-takers in the city,” Jan said. “I’m hopeful his brother will share some of those same talents.” Holismus hiccupped. “Assuming he can climb out of the bottle long enough.”

“Indeed,” Kurt said. “What I said to Jacques applies to you too, Lothar. I don’t care what got you sent to Three Penny Bridge or what you’ve done in the past. Your career starts here and now as far as I’m concerned. But if you want a future anywhere in this city, you’ve got to control your drinking.”

“Yes, captain!”

“Introductions over,” Jan announced. “I want you two to shift those pig heads away from the station entrance. Take them to the nearest butcher and have them cured, we could do with the rations.”

Kurt frowned. “It goes against the grain, accepting anything from the likes of Henschmann, but…”

“I doubt they’re poisoned, but that’ll need to be checked before we eat them.”

“Good thinking.”

Woxholt sent Scheusal and Holismus on their way, before leading

Kurt towards one of the ground floor windows.

"What do you make of them?"

"The Bretonnian seems promising if we can keep him and Raufbold apart. As for Joost's brother…" Kurt shook his head. "I've seen men go that way too often. One in a dozen ever comes back."

"I was thinking of putting them in charge of a shift each," Jan confided. "Scheusal on nights, Holismus on the graveyard detail. Give them two men each to lead, see how they cope."

"And you on the day shift?"

"Naturally. I'm too old to be prowling around looking for trouble in the middle of the night. Taal's teeth, I have to get up twice most nights to empty my bladder."

Kurt stopped to look over at the two recruits dealing with the pile of pig heads. "Sure you're not throwing them in too deep, too soon? You honestly believe they can handle the responsibility?"

Jan smirked. "I had the same conversation with your first captain when you joined the watch. You turned out alright, didn't you?" He grasped Kurt by the shoulder. "Trust me to do my job, yes?"

"I trust you, you know I do."

"Then trust my judgement."

"I will. I do."

"Good." Jan held the window open for Kurt to climb inside, before following him in.

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The taproom was larger than Kurt remembered from his brief visit earlier in the day. It helped that the low cloud of smoke had cleared and blazing torches now hung at regular intervals along the walls, providing considerably more illumination. A long wooden bar ran down one side of the room, leading to the shattered window Kurt had dived through. All the chairs and tables formerly used by drinkers at the tavern were being stacked in a corner by the rest of the watchmen, leaving a wide expanse of empty wooden floor. A handful of doors fed off the taproom, two leading to staircases that went up to the top floor, while two others preceded steps that descended into the bowels of the building.

"We've got six rooms upstairs-three at front, three at the back," Jan explained.

"With Molly's girls in the centre room at the front," Kurt cut in. "That was to be my office."

“All in good time. I’m planning to erect four cells in the centre of this space, clustered together-that way those on the desk can see the prisoners at all times, know what they’re up to.”

“Not much privacy.”

“Nobody will be in there for long. Drunks we’ll keep in one cell until they dry out, women in another, newly arrived men in the third and those waiting for transportation to Rijker’s in the fourth.”

“Sounds sensible. What about people we want to interrogate or keep in solitary?”

“There’s four rooms down the stairs. They tend to flood at high tide, so we can’t keep anyone in them for long, but that’ll serve a purpose.”

Kurt nodded his approval. “And upstairs?”

“Interview rooms for witnesses, an interrogation room for suspects. Plus sleeping quarters for the men when needed, and a room for ablutions.”

“What about Belladonna?”

Now it was Jan’s turn to look bemused. “Who?” Kurt explained about the intriguing young woman who had volunteered for the station, and her talents in deciphering the clues left behind at a crime. “Never served with a woman in the watch before,” Jan said. “Can she handle herself amongst the men? What happens if she starts a relationship with one of them?”

“She’s kept the commander at bay for three years, I think she can cope with the likes of Gorgeous Jorg and his cronies.” Kurt studied the rest of his recruits as they finished stacking the tables and chairs. “Tell me about the others. Who’s going to be our biggest problem?”

“Sounds like you’ve already encountered Raufbold.”

“We had a few words. He’s certainly fond of himself, but I doubt he’s much use on the watch.” Kurt shifted his gaze to the Black Cap talking with Raufbold. He had chiselled good looks, framed by dark brown hair and the bold stance of someone who knew what they wanted. “I’m surprised you suggested Holismus ahead of him. He looks like leadership material.”

“That’s Hans-Michael Mutig, from Tempelwijk. Captain Wout can’t speak highly enough of him.”

“Which begs the obvious question: if Mutig is such an asset, why did Wout offload him on us?”

“Exactly. Give me a drunk and you know where you are,” Jan said. “Mutig looks to me like a man waiting to be found out, with all that bluster and bravado. He’s hiding something.” Faulheit went past Kurt and Jan, huffing and puffing as he dragged the last table towards the corner, his considerable paunch impeding the effort. “You already know what I think of Martin Faulheit-all guts, no glory.”

Kurt patted his sergeant's stomach affectionately. "None of us are as thin as we used to be."

Jan sucked his stomach in, making his chest swell out even further. "I've got an excuse, I was retired until this afternoon. Faulheit's simply lazy, doing the least he can manage to slide by. I'd trust him about as far as I could throw him, and that's not far these days."

Two watchmen were standing by the broken window, ignoring each other as they looked out over the Bruynwarr. Kurt recognised the man on the left, but hadn't seen the other recruit before. He had a shock of black hair, a hooked nose and small, dark eyes. "Narbig was the only other volunteer besides Scheusal when I stormed in here earlier. Punched well above his weight."

"He got those scars two years ago, but won't tell anyone how it happened. Refuses to go below ground, no matter what. Narbig's been disciplined four times as a result, that's how he ended up here. Stupid thing is Joachim's fearless above ground, one of the best men I've ever trained," Jan volunteered. "The other one, he's trouble too. Name's Helmut Verletzung. He's got a temper like a caged animal, judging by the bruises his last wife sported whenever she dared go to market. He was in the River Watch for a spell, but got kicked out for violence. Specialises in stealing from the poor and the weak. The worst thing is, Verletzung gets results. But the end always justifies the means with him. He's trouble, no doubt about it."

Kurt frowned. "That doesn't exactly make Verletzer unique amongst this lot."

"His name's Verletzung, not Verletzer," Jan corrected.

"Sigmar's beard, how do you remember all their names so easily?"

"I've been a sergeant for fifteen years, you've been a captain less than fifteen hours. Give it time, Kurt, and you'll get to know them. Best way I've found is to go out on patrol with the men. There's nothing like walking the streets and alleyways with a new recruit to help you uncover their strengths and weaknesses. That's how I got to know you, back when you'd first joined the watch."

Kurt nodded. "There was another man here earlier, a weasel-faced little creature…"

"Bad moustache, grovelling manner, lecherous eyes?"

"That's him."

"Willy Bescheiden-plucky and devious in a fight, but has something of a gambling problem. Little Willy is rather too fond of playing dice, but his skill at the Anchor and Sun doesn't match his enthusiasm for it. He's got a direct line to the League, so he knows even more than me about what's happening in Marienburg most days.

But that direct line has got a hook buried in Willy's money pouch. There's no telling who he'd sell out to save his skin, let alone turn a profit."

"Where's he now?"

"Upstairs, making sure Gerta the Blurter doesn't leave until you've had a chance to talk with her."

"At least he's useful for something then," Kurt said, his glance passing across the bulk of his force. "Is it my imagination, or have we been given the city's worst collection of thugs, drunks and cowards?"

Jan grinned. "I'd say that's a pretty fair summary. There's a rough diamond or two amongst this lot, but most of them will stab you in the back the first chance they get."

"Charming." Kurt noticed how the light was fading outside the station. "It's nearly dusk. You want to start patrols tonight, or wait until morning?"

"Might as well start as we mean to go on," his sergeant suggested.

"Fair enough. Call the men together."

Jan saluted crisply before shouting at the recruits to form themselves into two rows in the centre of the room. Holismus and Scheusal had finished shifting the pigs from the entrance and joined the others. Bescheiden was last to appear, hurrying down the east staircase and inserting himself into the front row. "I left her talking with Molly through the wall," he offered by way of explanation, jerking a thumb towards the ceiling. "I think they're swapping war stories after men." Kurt waited for silence before speaking.

"Firstly, I want to thank you all for helping to reclaim this building for its rightful purpose. While we haven't taken complete possession of it, we can once more say the Black Caps have a presence on Three Penny Bridge. A few hours ago I promised you all that before the end of the day this building would be a Watch Station once more. Some of you laughed then, some even jeered me-but I've been proven right. Take that as a lesson if you wish: I mean what I say and I say what I mean. I'll never make you a promise I don't intend to keep and I'll never ask you to do something I'm not willing to do myself. Now, you've heard more than enough speeches from me for one day. Sergeant Woxholt will give you duty assignments for the next few days. If any of you wish to complain about the roster, take it up with him. If any of you wish to complain about Sergeant Woxholt, that's tough. He's the best sergeant in the watch and we're lucky to have him here. Sergeant?"

Jan stepped forward, a wry smile evident on his careworn features. "When I call out your name, step forward and respond by shouting back 'Yes, sergeant!' Is that clear?" A few of the recruits mumbled in response, but most said nothing. "I said is that clear?" Jan

demanded, the volume of his voice ascending.

"Yes, sergeant!" the recruits shouted back in unison.

"That's better. Now, on to the names: Scheusal, Bescheiden and Verletzung!" The trio all responded to being summoned. "You will be our night shift until the end of Geheimnistag. After that I'll assess how well each shift is working as a team, and reassign individuals as necessary. Consider this a probationary period, a chance to prove your worth." Bescheiden raised a meek hand. "Yes, what is it?"

"I worked days at my last station-" he begun, before a glare from the sergeant cut him off.

"Now you work the night shift, starting an hour before sundown each evening and remaining on duty until you're relieved by the graveyard shift. Scheusal?"

"Yes, sergeant?" the big Bretonnian responded, surprise in his voice.

"You'll be senior watchman on the night shift until I say otherwise. Bescheiden and Verletzung answer to you, you answer to me and I answer to the captain-that is our chain of command. Clear?" Scheusal nodded his agreement. "All three of you can get back into your lines."

Once the night shift had returned to their previous positions, another three names were called. Holismus, Raufbold and Narbig stepped forward, acknowledging the sergeant's stern voice. "You three are the graveyard shift." Raufbold immediately protested but a snarl of contempt from Woxholt silenced the vainglorious recruit. "You will take over from the night shift at midnight and remain on duty until the day shift relieves you, an hour before sunrise each morning. Holismus, you'll be in charge of the graveyard shift." Raufbold snorted derisively at this choice, but had learned enough to keep his mouth shut. Jan sent the graveyard shift back to their places before calling out Mutig and Faulheit. "You two will be on the day shift, along with another recruit, Belladonna Speer. I'll take charge of the day shift, as it will be the longest stint and no doubt will see the most traffic through here. Make no mistake, every one of you will be pushed to your limits and beyond by this assignment. Anybody expecting an easy time as a Black Cap on Three Penny Bridge is a fool and a simpleton. A lot of people don't want us here and a few will be determined to drive us out. That is their choice. It is our choice to stay. Any questions?"

Bescheiden started to raise his hand but thought better of it, no doubt recalling the short shrift his previous question had gotten. "Good. Those of you on the night shift, come and see me afterwards. Day shift can go back to their homes, but I expect to see you all here before dawn tomorrow morning. Graveyard shift, there are cots in all

the rooms upstairs. Form a detail and shift four of them into one room, that'll be where you can sleep until your shift starts. Dismissed!"

The assembly broke into groups as the newly formed trios gathered to introduce themselves to each other and discuss the situation. Jan looked to his captain for reassurance. "Happy?"

"Good start," Kurt said, nodding his approval. His eyes moved to the expectant faces of the night shift, lurking nearby. "I think they're waiting for you."

"Let them wait a minute longer. That's what most of this job is, waiting for something bad to happen, waiting for a robbery or a murder, waiting for some drunk to stagger home from the docks or the tavern and take a violent dislike to his family."

"I doubt we'll have to wait until closing time for our first case," Kurt agreed. "Speaking of which, I'd better go talk with Gerta the Blurter, before she tires of Molly's conversational skills." No sooner had the captain gone upstairs than a cadre of stone-faced elves marched into the station, all armed with sword, bow and arrow. Their leader had long, blond hair swept back from his face, piercing black eyes and a cruel mouth. He brought his brethren to a halt with a single gesture and they snapped to attention with icy precision. Jan and the watchmen were stunned into silence by the sudden arrival, exchanging baffled looks at this visitation.

Elves were rarely found outside their quarter, and were certainly never seen in Suiddock, let alone on Three Penny Bridge. For them to appear like this, armed for combat and bristling with murderous aggression, did not bode well.

The leader of the elves put his fists on his hips and scowled, his delicate nostrils sniffing the torpid air inside the station disdainfully. "Who is in charge of this hovel?" he demanded. Everyone looked at Jan, who sighed and took a step forwards.

"Our captain is upstairs, talking with a witness to a serious crime. Until he returns, I'm in charge."

"What is your name?"

Jan folded his arms. "You can call me Sergeant Woxholt. By what name do men know you?"

"You can call me Tyramin Silvermoon. I have come to claim the body of my brother, Arullen."

Jan bowed his head to show his sympathy. "We are sorry for your loss, Tyramin Silvermoon, brother of Arullen. But the body of the fallen one is not to be found here."

Silvermoon's scowl deepened, and his right hand shifted to the hilt of his sword. "I was told my brother was found not two hundred strides from this place. Are you not the bringers of the law, the

enforcers of justice for this part of the city?"

"We are, but the station in which we stand was until a few hours ago home to drunkenness and debauchery-no fit resting place for a fallen one, let alone a son from the House of Silvermoon."

The elf let his gaze pass around the former taproom, disgust lingering his eyes. "I see you speak true, Sergeant Woxholt. It does you credit, even if the company you keep and the place where you keep it does not." Jan inclined his head slightly, acknowledging the compliment, barbed as it was. Meanwhile his mind was racing. The House of Silvermoon was among the most powerful and important of the elf clans. For one of their sons to perish near here was a calamity for the city. If the culprit or culprits was not found and soon, the consequences could be ruinous for everyone involved. He had to do whatever he could to assuage the dead elf's brother, otherwise it would only create more trouble for the station in the days to come. Jan dropped to one knee, bowing his head.

"I believe the body of your brother may be found at the Temple of Morr, not far from here. When you wish, I will lead you there personally, to make certain Arullen is returned to you without further delay."

Silvermoon nodded his approval. "You will take us there now, Sergeant Woxholt. Our parents and all the families grieve for the loss of my brother. The sooner he returns to the halls of our father, the better."

"Of course," Jan agreed. "Give me a moment to consult with my men."

"My brethren and I will wait outside on the bridge, where the sea air is more to our liking." With that, Silvermoon led his cadre from the station, leaving the stunned watchmen in silence.

Once they had gone, Jan muttered a curse and got back to his feet. "Bescheiden, I want you to run to the Temple of Morr on Stoessel. The priest there is called Otto. Tell him I'm bringing a company of angry elves to take possession of the body. I can take them round the houses for a minute or two, but any longer than that and they'll know I'm stalling. Otto needs to get the dead elf ready for collection. If he's gathered any evidence from the body, he's got to hide it before I arrive with the elves."

"Yes, sergeant!" The diminutive Bescheiden made as if to go out the front doors.

"No, you fool," Jan hissed. "If Silvermoon sees you running out that way, he'll suspect what we're doing in a moment. You'll have to climb out the broken window and edge your way along to the abandoned temple next door." Bescheiden did as he was told, grumbling all the way about his not being a mountain goat. Jan glared

at the others, before selecting one he thought he could trust. “Mutig, go upstairs and tell the captain what’s happening. Best if he doesn’t meet the elves for now, that way he keeps a clean pair of hands. Well, go on!” Mutig hurried to the stairs, taking them two at a time. “The rest of you already have your assignments. Faulheit, you can head home. Scheusal, I’m leaving you in charge until I get back from the temple. Graveyard shift, go and assemble your sleeping quarters upstairs-and no fraternising with Molly and her girls. Anyone caught visiting them will spend a week in the basement, sweeping the floor during high tide.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Otto prayed beside the body of Arullen Silvermoon while Belladonna watched impatiently from the other side of the stone slab. “Oh, mighty Morr, Lord of Dreams, Protector of the Dead, watch over this soul and keep him safe so that he may know happiness until he finds his way to the next life that awaits us all.” Belladonna nodded her agreement and was about to undo the corpse’s clothing when Otto resumed his invocation, halting her progress. “Look upon this elf as you would look upon any of us. Grant him your favour and your wisdom, that he may not struggle against the dying of the light, but embrace the path to death and beyond. Let all those present bow their heads in silent prayer for the day when we too shall know your glory, and sleep forever in the realm of dreams and death.” The bald priest glared at the woman standing opposite him until she complied, dipping her head and mumbling a few words under her breath. Satisfied, Otto continued his prayers: “Verily it is spoken, that on the last day shall you return to us, oh wondrous Morr, and show us-”

“Oh, give it a rest!” Belladonna protested. “You’ve been saying a lament over this dead elf for the best part of an afternoon, Otto. Enough is enough. Besides, the elves have their own gods-what good does praying to Morr do for our dead friend here?”

“It is my way, the way of my kind. Besides, I know a little of the elf rituals involving the dead and my prayers will do no harm, and may even do some good.”

She rolled her eyes. “I studied with one of your brethren and he could get the rituals of death completed in the time it took you to finish the first sacrament.”

“Haste is indecent when it comes to the ways of Morr,” the priest murmured. “Besides, souls that have been wrongly sundered from their mortal bodies before the proper time have been known to return, seeking justice for the ills done to them. In the circumstances, I thought-”

“You thought Morr might guide this elf’s spirit back to his body so we could ask him a few questions,” she interjected, walking round the slab to stand beside him. Belladonna peered at the lifeless face. “Sorry, Otto, but it doesn’t look like there’s anybody home. Now, are you going to let me have a proper look at his clothes, or should I go back to the station and do something useful?”

“You will not touch the body, otherwise I must begin at the beginning once more-”

Belladonna silenced him with a gesture. “Don’t let’s start that again. Trust me, I won’t touch your precious corpse. The dead and the

dying are your speciality. I'm looking for evidence of the living."

Reluctantly, Otto stood aside, but he remained in the side chapel with her, watching every movement as she delicately moved aside each tattered garment. Belladonna studied the garb in minute detail, looking in the lining, inspecting the folds for anything that might offer a clue to the killer's identity. Her hands shivered in the cold stone chamber, a row of lit candles suspended from casings on the walls providing the only illumination. No windows offered a glimpse of the outside world, and no sunlight crept beneath the thick wooden door that separated the side chapel from the rest of the temple. "Does it have to be cold as the grave in here?" Belladonna asked, blowing hot air into her hands to warm the fingers.

"You get used to it," Otto said. "We keep the bodies here for three days before they go to whatever final resting place awaits them. Friends and families sometimes have to come many miles to see their loved ones. All temples of Morr are designed to be as cold as possible, to preserve the body and keep the smell of decay to a minimum. That is why temples are sited in the shadows, away from direct sun."

"I remember now. It was one of the reasons I stopped coming to temple, simply too cold for me." Belladonna paused as she was unbuttoning the dead elf's dark green tunic. A single, short hair was caught behind the button, held in place by dried blood. Using nimble fingers, she removed the hair and carried it over to the nearest candle, holding it in front of the flame to examine her find. "Definitely human, and it's from somebody who's going grey. The hair has been crudely cut, probably did that themselves. But there's no root at the other end, suggesting it fell out rather than being torn out. The person who stabbed our victim is in their forties and going bald-almost certainly male."

"How can you tell all that from a single hair?" Otto asked, disbelief in his voice.

She returned to the body and pointed at two different bloodstains on the clothing. "This elf was attacked twice. Blood stains change colour as they dry. The wounds to the stomach were made first, and that blood is darker, like the bloodstain in which I found the short hair. All the other wounds were made later, anything up to an hour later-the bloodstains from the second attack are that much lighter." She pointed to dark areas around the tunic's collar, below where the neck had been torn apart. "See?"

Otto leaned closer, his eyes peering intently at the fabric. "There's another hair, embedded in the material there-but it's much longer than the other one you found." He moved aside to let her see it. But before Belladonna got close enough, the sound of a fist pounding on wood echoed through the temple.

“Is anyone in there?” a nasal voice called from outside. “It’s Willy Bescheiden, from Three Penny Bridge. Sergeant Woxholt sent me!”

Belladonna let go of the priest’s arm and drew a dagger from a sheath hidden beneath her cloak. “I’ll come with you. For all we know, Bescheiden could have been involved with the elf’s murder.”

“Doubtful,” Otto said. “I’ve met this man before, he has the courage of a sausage seller.” The priest strode out of the side chapel, followed by Belladonna. They went to the front door of the temple, where Otto pulled back a small shutter in the broad wooden door to look outside. The top of Bescheiden’s head was visible, his greasy hair slicked across a balding pate. “What do you want?”

“The elves are coming for the corpse! The sergeant is taking them the long way round from the station, but he sent me to warn you. They’ll be here any-” Bescheiden’s voice stopped abruptly.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” Otto hissed.

“They’re coming-I’ve got to go!” Bescheiden fled, his footfalls quickly fading away into the distance, replaced by the steady stomping of an approaching company. Otto slid the shutter back into place, thought furrowing his brow.

“Get back to the body and redress it,” he urged Belladonna after a moment. “If the elves suspect you’ve been interfering with it, there’ll be every kind of trouble imaginable.”

“But I haven’t interfered with it,” she protested.

“You’ve been in close, physical contact with a dead elf. That doesn’t happen often, and certainly not with human women. As far as they are concerned, your mere presence here is an affront to dignity.”

“Charming,” Belladonna said. “I’m trying to determine who or what killed that poor soul and they’re going to find a way of blaming me for shaming his corpse.”

“Many are the ways of death, Belladonna Speer-don’t let yours be in this place,” Otto urged.

“Fine, I’ll put him back the way we found him,” she agreed. “But I’m not hiding when they come into the side chapel. I’m a member of the watch and I’ve got a legitimate reason to be there.” She hurried back to the corpse while Otto listened to the sound of the elves approaching. Moments later, the stomping of feet halted outside the temple and a heavy fist banged on the wooden doors. “We both know you didn’t pick the pocket of an elf. Nobody believes that, not even you,” Kurt insisted. “But you did see something involving the elf that was found dead today, didn’t you? Now either you saw him being murdered, or saw the body being dumped on the steps between the Stevedores and Teamsters Guild building and the Marienburg Gentlemen’s Club. So, which is it?”

Gerta Gestehen poked her tongue out at the captain.

Kurt rolled up the sleeves of his tunic. He'd been locked in this room with the city's most frequent confessor for more than an hour and she hadn't spoken a word in that time. Gerta was sat by the window, looking out at Three Penny Bridge below. Lamplighters were going about their business, providing meagre illumination for those brave enough or foolish enough to pass over the notorious cobbled span after dark. An occasional wooden stall was dragged past by a weary merchant, heading home after a long day selling his wares in a more prosperous part of Suiddock. The cobbles were an unforgiving surface, making it that much harder to pull a cart, especially if it was still heavily laden after a bad day of few sales.

The scent of evening meals being cooked drifted in through the open window: stews and sausages, sour bread and boiling cabbage, paprika and peppercorns. The ever present gulls were no longer visible as they wheeled and turned in the darkening sky, but their cries still rent the air, grating at Kurt's nerves. Competing with the gulls were the catcalls of Molly and her girls in the next room, offering to give any male who wandered over the bridge a good time-at a price. The sooner we find them a new home, the better, Kurt thought, before pushing himself to concentrate on the matter in hand. "Well? Did you see the murder or not?"

"You've no right to keep me here," she replied, finally breaking her silence.

"She talks!" Kurt said exultantly.

"I've done nothing wrong," Gerta insisted.

"I thought you were the finest pickpocket in all of Suiddock?"

"I might have been mistaken about that."

"Perhaps, but back when you first accosted me in the street, you told me things only the murderer or a witness could know. You told me the elf had a deep green tunic, and his skin was like alabaster."

"A lucky guess."

"You said you heard him whispering something under his breath."

"I was lying," Gerta spat out, pouting at him. "There, are you happy now? Can I go?" She rose from her chair but Kurt pushed her back down, not an easy task with a determined woman of her size.

"No, you can't. Even if you didn't witness the murder, even if you didn't see what the body-dumpers looked like, you still heard the dead elf's last words. Anything he said could be a vital clue, the key to finding his killers. I need to know what he said and you're not leaving here until I do!" Gerta folded her arms, a sulky look on her plump features. "Well?" Kurt insisted.

"Tooth and claw."

"Yes?"

"That was all he said – 'Tooth and claw.'"

Kurt pondered these cryptic words. “You heard him say this yourself?”

“Not exactly,” she admitted.

“You mean not at all, or yes you did?”

“I didn’t hear it myself, but I know a man who did. He was there, he sold me this.” Gerta reached into the deep valley between her breasts and extracted a tiny brooch of silver and jade, delicately crafted from the finest materials and gemstones. “Cost me a pretty penny, I can tell you. Don’t get workmanship like this everyday. I’m planning to wear it the night I’m reunited with my Engelbert.”

Kurt snatched the brooch from her fat fingers and studied it closely, ignoring her cries of protest. At the centre of the brooch was a shard of a dull green gemstone he did not recognise. Unlike most jewels, it was uncut and unpolished, making it appear as little more than a stone chip. But as Kurt turned it over in his fingers, light danced inside the shard for a moment, drawing his eyes closer, as if the stone was calling to him. He felt a stirring inside himself, as if he was being called by some unseen power. Kurt tore his eyes away from the brooch and jabbed a finger at his prisoner. “The reason you don’t see workmanship like this everyday, Gerta, is because this looks like it was crafted by elves, for elves. You never see workmanship like this, certainly not for sale on the streets of Suiddock. Who sold this to you and how much did you pay for it?” She named a four-figure number and Kurt snorted in disbelief, slipping the brooch into a tunic pocket for safekeeping. Gerta quickly shaved a zero off the end of the number, before removing another zero. “You bought a priceless brooch for twenty-seven guilders?” he snarled. “Didn’t that strike you as unlikely?”

“I think it was a bit of a bargain, but Fingers said he needed to raise some cash fast to-” Gerta clamped a hand over her own mouth to stop herself saying any more.

“Fingers sold this to you, did he? Fingers who? What’s his last name?” Gerta shrugged. “It doesn’t matter whether you tell me or not,” Kurt warned. “Sergeant Woxholt will be back soon and he knows the name and nickname of every thief, drunk and liar in all of Marienburg. Tell me now and it’ll go the better for you. Well?”

“Blake, his name’s Fingers Blake.”

Kurt smiled. “That’s better. And where do I find this Fingers Blake?”

“I’m not going to tell you that. Even your sergeant won’t know all of Blake’s boltholes. Arrest me for obstruction of justice if you want, but I’ll never tell.”

“Fine, you’re under arrest,” Kurt snapped.

“I am?” Joy spread across Gerta’s face like sunshine after a

thunderstorm. “Does that mean… you’re sending me to Rijker’s Isle?”

“No.”

“No?”

“Not yet, anyway. You’re withholding evidence that’s vital to a murder investigation. So I’m keeping you here until we get some answers. Send you to Rijker’s Isle and I’ll get nothing. Let you go home and the murderers might decide to silence you permanently. The safest thing I can do is keep you here at the station, under our protection, pending further investigations.”

“But what am I supposed to do here?” Gerta protested.

“Can you cook?”

“Of course-”

“Good, we need a cook. The men will be hungry and tired by the end of their shifts. I hereby sentence you to seven days hard labour in the kitchen of the Three Penny Bridge station.”

Gerta looked perplexed. “This place was a tavern this morning. Does it even have a stove?”

Kurt shrugged. “I haven’t been in all the rooms yet, how would I know? Stay here, I’ll send someone up to fetch you when I’ve found out.” He turned to go but paused by the door. “I know this isn’t what you wanted, but the station is probably the safest place for you now.” Kurt looked back at her. “Deal?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Not as such, but I thought it better to try and persuade you. From everything I’ve heard, Gerta Gestehen can be a remarkably strong-willed woman.”

“Alright, I’ll stay-on the condition you send me to Rijker’s once the killer is caught.”

Kurt smiled. “I’ll see what can be arranged.”

“Can I have my brooch back?” she asked hopefully.

“No. That’s evidence.” Belladonna returned to the side chapel to find a ghostly presence floating above the dead elf on the stone slab. The translucent wraith turned to face her as she entered, stopping the Black Cap in her tracks. “Sweet Shallya-Otto was right!” Fascinated by the unexpected spectre, Belladonna ventured nearer to the corpse. “Can you hear me? Can you speak? What’s your name?”

The phantom’s mouth moved with agonising slowness. “Moon…” it gasped. “SSSilver… moon.”

“Your name’s Silvermoon?” Belladonna asked gently.

“Yesss…”

“Who murdered you?”

“Tootttth… annnd… clawww…”

“And a blade. Someone stabbed you with a blade.”

“Yesss…”

"Who did this to you?"

"Clawww… tooth and clawww…"

"I know, they used tooth and claw to murder you," Belladonna said, her voice low and soothing. "But we need to know who did this to you, so we can stop them hurting others the same way."

"SSStop themmm…"

"Yes, we want to stop them." Belladonna could hear loud, shouted voices from within the temple. Otto had delayed the other elves as long as he could, but now they were inside. She had but a few moments before they found the side chapel. Who knows what would happen if they discovered her interrogating the ghost of their dead brother. "Rest. We will stop them, I promise."

"You mussst ssstop them…"

"I promise," Belladonna said. By now the heavy footfalls of the approaching elves were in the corridor outside the side chapel. She watched as the phantom faded away. "Rest in peace, Silvermoon."

"Ressst…" Tyramin Silvermoon pushed past the priest and forced his way into the side chapel. Inside he found the body of his beloved younger brother, laying peacefully atop a stone slab, his face in repose. A hooded and cloaked figure was kneeling at the head of the slab, face lowered respectfully, a prayer being whispered for the souls of the fallen. "Who's this?" Tyramin demanded, his suspicions already aroused by the transparent delaying tactics of the Morr worshipper.

"One of the Black Caps from Three Penny Bridge. She helped transport your brother's body here to preserve his dignity until the family came forward to claim him. She has kept guard over him for many hours, without respite or relief, refusing to let anyone but me near him."

Tyramin let his hand stray to the hilt of his sword, making the movement conspicuous enough for the priest to be in little doubt of his intentions. "You swear no others have touched my brother's body?"

Otto stared directly into the angry elf's eyes. "I swear upon my soul and my belief in Morr that all I have spoken to you is the truth. I know the importance your kind place upon the preservation of mortal remains until they can be transported to their final resting place. I have performed rituals of cleansing and purification, as is your custom in such circumstances." The priest bowed his head and stepped aside. "Come, Belladonna-let the brothers be alone."

Tyramin watched as the two humans left the chamber before telling his men to stand guard outside. Only when the side chapel was empty did he approach his little brother's lifeless body. Closing his eyes, Tyramin let his thoughts and feelings reach out to make contact with Arullen's spirit. All was as the priest had said-cleansing and

purification were complete, the body ready to be taken back to Sith Rionnasc'namishathir. In a way, Tyramin was disappointed. He wanted something more to do, someone to rage against for his brother's senseless murder. But he would have to preserve that anger and fury until the day it could be unleashed upon Arullen's killer, hold that burning rage like a fire in his belly. For now he must focus upon the rituals of mourning, must-"Tooth… and clawww…"

The words were an echo in the cold, lifeless chamber, more felt than spoken. Tyramin's eyes sprang open, hoping against hope to see his little brother was somehow still alive. But Arullen was cold and gone, the broken flesh and torn bones containing only remnants of the spirit that had once occupied them. Still the words whispered inside Tyramin's thoughts: "Tooth… and clawww…" Tyramin allowed himself to smile, knowing he would not smile again for many, many days. Those three simple words had told him all he needed to know about those who had killed Arullen. "Thank you, brother. Thank you for pointing the way."

He called his brethren into the side chapel and commanded them to prepare a litter for carrying Arullen back to Sith Rionnasc'namishathir, back to the resting place of his ancestors, so that the youngest Silvermoon could join them in the life beyond this life, the world beyond this world. As the cadre did their duty, Tyramin went outside and found the priest talking with the Black Cap. "Thank you for observing our ways and rituals. I did not know those outside our walls knew to do such things, and I am grateful you were present to perform these rituals for my brother. If you or anyone you hold dear ever needs my help, come to the gates of the Sith Rionnasc'namishathir and ask for me. The House of Silvermoon is in your debt."

The priest bowed low, acknowledging the honour and privilege bestowed upon him.

To Tyramin's surprise, the Black Cap removed her hood and spoke to him. "I am among those seeking justice on whomever murdered your brother. If I may be so bold, what was his name?"

"Arullen," the elf replied, his voice catching with emotion. "He was Arullen Silvermoon."

"Thank you." She swept the hood back up into place, bowing her head respectfully to him.

Tyramin Silvermoon went back to supervising his cadre, once more surprised by the kindness shown to him and his brother by these outsiders. In his limited experience, men were boorish, drunken creatures that caused more trouble than they were worth. Perhaps he had been wrong about them. Still, he did not trust them enough to mention the three other elves still missing. All were friends of Arullen

and all had been seen leaving the elf quarter together. Tyramin had little doubt the lost three were dead and even less doubt about who must have slain them. An old enemy was rearing its ugly head once more within the city, and this reappearance boded ill for all the inhabitants of Marienburg. Belladonna told Sergeant Woxholt about her encounter with the dead elf's spirit as they walked back to Three Penny Bridge. It was well after sunset and Woxholt carried a lantern on a pole to light their way. Burning torches to illuminate the cobbled streets and passageways of Suiddock were few and far between, even more so the closer you got to Three Penny Bridge. "He kept saying we must stop them," she mused. "At the time, I thought he was simply agreeing with me when I said we would stop them. But looking back, maybe he was trying to warn me. I think Arullen Silvermoon was killed by more than one attacker."

"You mean by a group," the sergeant clarified.

"No, by more than one attacker. First he was stabbed in the stomach, a mortal wound, but he got away from that person. Later he was attacked by someone or something else, perhaps multiple attackers. The person who stabbed him first was a man-balding, grey hair, perhaps forty summers old."

"And the second attack?"

Belladonna shrugged. "Arullen kept repeating one phrase, over and over-tooth and claw. What does that suggest to you?"

"A wild animal of some kind, or a creature so savage as to be akin to a wild animal."

"Animals often hunt in packs," she said.

"So do the Fen Loonies," Woxholt pointed out. "And they've been known on occasion to enter the city after dark, searching for fresh meat and delicacies."

"Elf flesh would certainly qualify as a delicacy for the likes of Koos and his mutant kin." Belladonna stopped as they got within sight of the station. "There's another, more obvious question we haven't asked yet: what in the name of Verena was an elf from the House of Silvermoon doing in Suiddock after dark?"

The sergeant nodded. "I've been wondering that myself. If we knew why, I suspect we'd be a long way towards finding Arullen's killer-or killers." He pointed to the station, where a line of young women in various states of undress were climbing down a rope ladder from the first floor. "Looks like the captain has found Molly and her girls a new place to call home." Kurt was standing at the foot of the ladder, a burning torch in one hand as he coaxed down the women. Meanwhile men from the night and graveyard shifts were carrying beds out of the station and into the abandoned temple next door.

"Seemed the most obvious solution," Kurt explained as

Belladonna and the sergeant got closer. “Nobody else dares set foot in the temple, because that’s where Joost Holismus went mad five years ago. The locals apparently think the place could be cursed but-”

“But they said the same about our station and Molly’s girls never had a problem there,” Belladonna observed, finishing the captain’s sentence for him. “Clever solution.”

“It was my idea,” Molly replied as she stepped down from the ladder on to the cobbles, before turning to Kurt. “That’s the last of the girls and their things out. I’ve loosened the barricade from inside, so you should have no problems getting into the room now.”

“Thank you for being so understanding,” he replied.

“No skin off my chin,” she said, her gaze taking in the abandoned temple. “You don’t want us doing business in your station and Manann knows we didn’t get many customers today after you arrived. Besides, I’ve always had my eye on the temple. Maybe I’ll start my own religion-the Cult of Molly.” She strode off into the temple, shouting at Raufbold and Narbig to be careful with the bed they were carrying.

“You know, I wouldn’t put it past her to open a church,” Belladonna observed dryly.

“Excuse me,” a timorous voice said. The front door on one of the fortified homes on the other side of Three Penny Bridge stood open, a halfling woman beside it gesturing for them to come over. She was clad from head to toe in black, her hands clutching a funeral wreath. “I want to report a murder.”

Woxholt leaned closer to Kurt, stifling a yawn while he whispered in the captain’s ear. “Do you want me to handle this?”

Kurt shook his head. “Go home and get some sleep, old friend-you look exhausted. I can handle this. Besides, you’ve got to be back here before dawn to supervise the changeover from graveyard to day shift.”

“Good point,” the sergeant agreed, another yawn overwhelming him. “I’ll see you in the morning.” Woxholt shuffled away, nodding goodnight to Belladonna as he departed.

She looked across at the anxious resident. “Why don’t I talk with her? Whatever’s troubling her, she might find it easier dealing with a woman.”

“True, but if she’s witnessed a murder-”

“Then I’ll bring it to you,” Belladonna promised. She smiled at him. “You can’t do everything yourself, captain. You’ve got to learn to delegate tasks to those under you. Besides, it’ll give you a chance to watch the others, see how they operate, discover their strengths and weaknesses.”

Kurt frowned. “Sounds like you’re the one who should be captain, not me.”

“No thanks. The watchmen would never accept a woman as their leader, and I don’t want the job. I’ve seen what power does to people, the way it corrupts so many of them.”

“How do you know it won’t corrupt me?”

“I read your file before volunteering for this station, I know what happened to you in Altdorf. You may have been many things in the past, but corruption is the one taint nobody has ever accused you of.” She walked across to the halfling woman, leaving Kurt to ponder the wisdom of her words.

CHAPTER EIGHT

It was close to midnight before the first citizen ventured into the station, looking around in wonder at the transformation overtaking the building. Scheusal, Bescheiden and Verletzung were busy erecting holding cells in the former taproom. Scheusal was doing his best to remain patient with the garrulous complaining of Bescheiden, and Verletzung's dour silence, but even the big man from Bretonnia occasionally lost his temper. He was letting loose a stream of abuse as the citizen walked in.

"Shallya save you if you hit my thumb with that hammer one more time," Scheusal snarled at Bescheiden, his face flushed crimson with anger.

"Is it my fault if you keep sticking your thumb in the way of my hammering?" Bescheiden asked.

"Will it be my fault if I shove that hammer somewhere so dark and so deep you'll need an apothecary and a lamp-lighter to retrieve it?" Scheusal was about to make good on his threat when Verletzung tapped his shoulder and pointed at the entrance. "Now what?"

The citizen wavered at the sight of Scheusal bearing down on him, but stood his ground. "I've heard tell this place has reopened as a watch station."

"For once the rumours are true."

"I wasn't sure. You see, you've still got the tavern sign hanging outside."

Scheusal sighed. "Willy, go upstairs and ask the captain what he wants to do about the Abandon Hope sign. Tell him we're not sure it's the best way to encourage people to come here with their problems."

"On my way!" Bescheiden tossed his hammer to Verletzung and scampered up the east staircase. Scheusal turned his attention back to the citizen.

"So, you want to report a crime, yes?" he asked in his thick Bretonnian accent.

"Err, yes. I think my neighbour is involved with smuggling."

"And why do you think that?"

"How many people do you know who have twenty slaves from Araby in their two-room house?"

"Not many," Scheusal conceded. "What's your neighbour's name and where do they live?"

The citizen took a step back, staring in bewilderment at the Black Cap. "Do you think I'm mad? I'm not going to tell you that, she'll know I'm the one who reported her."

"Then why come to us?"

“So you can put a stop to it. I don’t see why she should have twenty slaves when I don’t have any. It’s an injustice, a complete injustice.” He folded his arms, as if he’d told them all they needed to know. “So what are you going to do about this?”

Scheusal pursed his lips. “We’ll look into it as a matter of urgency. In the meantime, I suggest you keep a careful note of all the comings and goings from this woman’s property, day and night. That’s the best way to monitor the movement of these… slaves.”

“But I can’t read or write,” the citizen replied.

“Can you draw?”

“A little-why?”

“I want you to draw me a picture of all the slaves you see being smuggled via your neighbour’s home. That way we’ll be able to keep track of them. Can you do that for me?”

“I suppose so,” the citizen said uncertainly.

“We’ve had several reports of slave trafficking already. It’s possible there’ll be a reward for any information that leads to a breakthrough in these terrible crimes.”

“A reward?”

Scheusal tapped a finger against his bulbous nose. “You didn’t hear it from me, understand?”

“Absolutely!” By now the citizen’s eyes were gleaming with avarice, his imagination evidently planning the ways he could spend this reward. “Will the reward be in guilders?”

“I shouldn’t be surprised if it was golden guilders-but don’t tell anyone else, it’s our secret.”

The visitor tapped the side of his nose conspiratorially. “You can count on me!” He scurried from the building, but returned a moment later. “These drawings -charcoal or pastel?”

Scheusal furrowed his brow, as if thinking the question through thoroughly. “Charcoal-that way you can concentrate on capturing their likenesses without having to worry about what colours to use.”

“Right you are!” The citizen practically ran from the station. Scheusal and Verletzung were still laughing when Bescheiden returned with the captain.

“Sigmar’s beard, what’s so amusing?” Kurt demanded. Once they had recovered enough to explain, the captain pointed out the station had no funding and certainly no money to offer any rewards. To Kurt’s surprise, it was the taciturn Verletzung who answered him.

“You’re not from Suiddock, captain, so you probably wouldn’t understand. I grew up here. You want people from these parts to volunteer any information, you have to make it worth their while-they expect to be compensated. As long as they believe there’s a reward for the best information, you’ll have a steady stream of people coming

here with tip-offs, hoping to cash in."

"It was the same in Bretonnia," Scheusal chimed in. "As captain, you can decide who's given you the best information and how much reward they deserve to get."

"And where do I find this reward money?"

Verletzung shrugged. "Take the gold from the criminals. Call it a crime tax."

"We steal from the robbers to pay the poor for information?"

"It's not stealing. You're confiscating stolen property."

Kurt frowned. "This never happened in Goudberg."

"Nothing ever happens in Goudberg," Belladonna said as she walked in, escorting the halfling woman from across the bridge. "Why else did you think you had such an easy time there?"

Verletzung's smile faded. "Captain, you're in Suiddock now-normal rules don't apply here. If you want to beat the smugglers and thieves and murderers, you have to be as ruthless as them. More ruthless."

Kurt frowned, considering what his recruits had suggested. After a few moments, he nodded his agreement. "Spread the word to the graveyard shift when they come on. All property held by criminals at the time of their arrest is to be seized as the proceeds of illegal acts-no matter how big or small. And when you've finished building that cell, take down the sign outside. This is a watch station, not a tavern."

"Yes, captain," Scheusal replied, saluting crisply. He exchanged approving glances with Verletzung. Rare was the captain who listened to what his men had to say, let alone acted on it. Belladonna asked Kurt to hear what the grieving halfling had to say, so all three of them went upstairs to his office, the room recently vacated by Molly and her girls. Kurt had fashioned a desk for himself by removing the door from another room and laying it across an empty bed frame. Belladonna ushered the diminutive woman onto a low chair before sitting beside her, while Kurt paced back and forth in front of the windows overlooking Three Penny Bridge. "This is Silvia Vink," Belladonna said. "Her husband Titus drowned two days ago. Afterwards Silvia was told Titus had died accidentally, but she doesn't believe that. She's convinced her husband was murdered. Tell the captain why, Silvia."

When the halfling spoke, her brittle voice was choked with emotion. But she kept going her fingers working the funeral wreath between them like prayer beads, turning it slowly around in a circle. "Titus runs…" she began, before correcting herself. "Titus ran the fish market beside this station, at the Riddra end of the bridge. He took it over from the previous owner, Herr Middendorp, back in Jahrdrung. My husband was a halfling like me, but he matched any man for

strength or courage. He stood up to the world and he walked tall, never pretending to be something he wasn't, never giving in to anyone who tried to treat him as less than a man because of his size. I was so proud of him, of all he had achieved…" By now tears were flowing freely down Silvia's face and her chin was quivering with grief.

Kurt paused his pacing to smile some encouragement to her. "Go on, Frau Vink, please."

She nodded, swallowing hard. "A month ago, a man came to the market. He said Herr Middendorp had been paying a percentage of the takings as a safety measure. The man said it only needed a stray match at night or a consignment of rotten fish to ruin the market, to put it out of business. What would happen if Titus got sick or accidentally broke both his legs? He wouldn't be able to work and the market would have to close. The man said he could protect Titus, make sure nothing bad ever happened to him."

"Extortion with menaces, in other words," Kurt said.

Silvia sighed. "I had never seen Titus so angry. He went to see the previous owner, demanding to know why Herr Middendorp hadn't mentioned this other man. Titus also talked with the other merchants and stall holders nearby. All of them said it was easier to pay this man than to fight back. Surrender your tithe and there was no trouble, everybody was happy. But Titus wasn't happy."

"He decided to fight back?"

"My husband, he saved for many years to buy the fish market from Herr Middendorp. It was Titus' dream to have his own business. He didn't see why he had to give a tenth of his takings to a stranger. When the man came back for his money, Titus refused. He strode into the middle of Three Penny Bridge and told anyone who would listen that all you needed was the courage to stand up to bullies and they would leave you alone. He called the man all kinds of terrible names and said bullies had no power over us."

Silvia frowned, struggling with the memory of what happened next. "That evening I waited for Titus to finish at the market-but he never came home. I stayed up all night, expecting him to walk in at any minute. I hoped that perhaps he'd gone to a tavern and gotten drunk, lost his way. Next day I heard about a halfling who had drowned in the night and I knew it was Titus. He couldn't swim, never learned how. He said if halflings had been meant to swim, then we wouldn't have had boats and fishermen."

"You believe your husband was deliberately drowned to make an example of him?"

"Yes," Silvia spat.

"Do you have any proof?" Kurt asked, his voice full of kindness.

She grimaced. "This man went around the next day, boasting

about what he'd done. He does not care who knows he drowned my husband. This man, he brags about murdering Titus, he flaunts what he did. He believes himself immune from retribution or prosecution. If I had the strength, I would drown him for what he's done. Instead I come here, hoping you can punish him for murdering my husband."

"Do you know his name?"

"Everybody knows his name-Abram Cobbius."

"I see." Kurt looked out the window at the few people using the bridge in the dark. A footsore crier made his way slowly past, jangling a bell and announcing the midnight hour. "Abram Cobbius-the cousin of Lea-Jan Cobbius, Master of the Honourable Guild of Stevedores and Teamsters."

"Yes, that's him," Silvia agreed.

"You do realise that by coming to us, you're placing your own life in danger, Frau Vink?"

She nodded. "Titus is dead, and Abram Cobbius has taken over the market, claiming it was left to him in a suicide note written by my husband. Titus was a simple man, captain-he couldn't read or write. But he would never disinherit me, even if his life were at stake. Now one of Cobbius' thugs runs the market. He's put the prices up so they're ten times what they were before-none of my friends in Suiddock can afford to shop there anymore. The only people who go into the market are thugs and servants from rich families. Meanwhile, I have no income, no husband and no hope. But I also have nothing left to lose. I will speak against this man, if you have the courage to arrest him." The little woman looked at Kurt with sad eyes, made bloodshot by the shedding of so many tears. Belladonna was also studying the captain closely. He knew reestablishing the Black Caps on Three Penny Bridge would not be easy. But he hadn't realised how quickly his decisions would become a matter of life and death-not just for him and his recruits, but also for the ordinary citizens of Suiddock. "Well, captain?" Silvia asked. "Do you have the courage?"

"Yes," Kurt replied. "I do, Frau Vink. My Black Caps will arrest Abram Cobbius and charge him with your husband's murder. You have my word on that." Belladonna escorted Frau Vink back home while Kurt roused the graveyard shift from their beds. The captain had offered to find the halfling widow a new home until Cobbius was safely behind bars, but she declined. "I want to be here to see that monster punished," she said. "My Titus wouldn't hide from them and neither will I, captain. Thank you for the offer, but I'm staying where I am."

Holismus, Narbig and Raufbold grumbled about having to get up scant hours after going to sleep, but Kurt had little sympathy for them. "I've been on duty since before dawn and I doubt I'll see my bed

before the next dawn. Now, get out on patrol. I expect each of you to make three arrests before sunrise."

"Three arrests?" Raufbold protested, his usually sleek hair a mess of tangles. "Taal's teeth, who are we going to arrest at this time of the morning?"

"Drunks," Holismus said, his voice betraying bitter experience.

"And sinners," Narbig added, strapping a short dagger to his left hip. He stalked from the station, eager for the hunt, while the other two watchmen staggered out after him a few minutes later. Belladonna returned as they departed, ignoring Raufbold's offer to accompany her inside. She found Kurt positioning a chair beside the long wooden bar. A cool breeze through the broken window brought the smell of the sea into the large room, slowly overcoming the lingering odour of stale beer and despair that had been the Abandon Hope Tavern's more usual scent. Belladonna did her best to stifle a yawn, but Kurt noticed it.

"How long since you got any sleep?"

"I could ask the same of you," she countered.

"You can sleep on the bed frame in my office," Kurt offered. "Better that than have you sharing with the rest of the watchmen. I'm not sure how many of them I'd trust and a few deserve to be on Rijker's themselves, judging by what Jan's told me about their service records."

Belladonna grimaced. "Shallya only knows how Raufbold came by the nickname Gorgeous Jorg. He makes my skin crawl. There's something not right about him."

"There's something not right about almost everybody assigned to this place," Kurt sighed. He noticed her arching a mocking eyebrow at him. "Present company excepted, of course."

She laughed. "No, you're probably right. I must've been mad to volunteer for this station."

"You did well with the halfling widow."

"All she needed was someone to listen."

"That's all most folk need to open up. Rare is the Black Cap who offers citizens that chance."

"She's determined to speak out against Abram Cobbius, no matter the consequences. If we want to build a case against him, we should get Otto to examine her husband's body. Prove Titus didn't drown, or was drowned against his will, and you're halfway to a conviction."

"A confession would seal the case."

"If he's been bragging about what he did to everyone on Three Penny Bridge, getting a confession should be easy," Belladonna said.

Kurt nodded. "I don't doubt that. It's what happens next that'll determine our future. If Abram's cousin decides to intervene, we

haven't the men or resources to fight the guild. Lea-Jan Cobbius could swat us aside like flies, without even trying."

"But you promised Mrs. Vink-"

"I'll keep my promise," Kurt said quietly. "I'm banking on Lea-Jan losing patience with his bully of a cousin and deciding that Abram's a disgrace and an embarrassment to the Cobbius name."

"You're putting a lot of faith in a man you've never met."

Before she could question Kurt further, Narbig returned with the station's first two arrests, holding the pair apart to stop them fighting. Both were drunk, bruised and naked from the waist down. Belladonna folded her arms and shook her head.

"My, it must be colder outside than it looks," she smirked. The two prisoners quickly clamped their hands over their groins, forgetting all about the dispute that had brought them to the station. Kurt opened the cell door and Narbig propelled the inebriated twosome inside.

"Drunk and disorderly," he reported. "Found them fighting outside the Cock and Bull, south side of Stoessel. I'm suggesting a night in the cells so they can sleep off the drink, followed by a hefty fine."

"Sounds good to me," Kurt agreed. He vaulted the bar to retrieve a blackboard and chalk. "Either of these two given you their names?"

Narbig pointed at the drunk with least to brag about. "He's called Winkie, for obvious reasons-"

"Am not!" Winkie protested. "Nobody calls me that, except this sausage-sucking-"

"And his friend is Scratch. Fond of using his nails in a fight, apparently."

"I've been called worse," Scratch responded. "Besides, anything's better than Winkie."

"So I can see," Belladonna quipped.

"Enough!" Kurt commanded. "You two in the cell, shut your mouths or we'll double your fines." The prisoners grumbled beneath their breath, but retreated to opposite corners of the caged cell and contented themselves in glaring at each other with murderous intent. Satisfied, the captain turned to his recruits. "Good work, Narbig, but I don't doubt there's plenty more where those two came from."

The badly scarred Black Cap saluted crisply. "I'll get back on patrol, find some more." He marched from the station, leaving the yawning Belladonna to face the captain.

"Go and get some sleep," Kurt insisted. "You're no use to me if you can't keep your eyes open."

"I'm going, I'm going," she replied, wandering past the caged cell to the western staircase.

“And Belladonna?” Kurt called after her. “Good work.”

She gave him a salute, before disappearing up the wooden stairs. The night slid by like the dark waters of the Rijksweg, bringing further arrests and more occupants for the single cell. By the time dawn broke on Marienburg, the caged enclosure was full to bursting with thieves, burglars, drunks, bullies and brigands. Narbig proved himself a relentless thief-taker, bringing half of all those arrested, but Holismus also pulled his weight. Raufbold was least successful, struggling in at daybreak with a single collar to his credit. The captive was badly bruised and battered, his face beaten to a bloody pulp. Kurt studied the prisoner and captor closely. “What’s the charge?”

Raufbold smirked in his usual, cocksure way. “Caught this piece of scum over on Luydenhoek, trying to sell crimson shade to anyone coming into Suiddock.”

“What happened to the drugs?”

The Black Cap shrugged. “Must have fallen into the water when he resisted arrest.”

“Put up quite a fight, I notice.” Kurt grabbed one of Raufbold’s hands and scrutinised the angry red knuckles. “Threw his face repeatedly against your knuckles. You’re fortunate to make it back here alive.”

The watchman’s face darkened. “You calling me a liar, captain?”

“Why-have you got a guilty conscience?”

“There’s nothing keeping me awake at night, except the love of several good women.” Raufbold turned to his prisoner for a laugh. “You hear that one? Nothing keeping me awake except-”

“Spare us,” Kurt interjected. “It wasn’t funny the first time, and neither are you.” He stepped closer to the recruit, staring into Raufbold’s eyes.

“You get any closer, captain, and people will think you’re planning to propose,” Raufbold quipped.

“Your eyes are bloodshot.”

“So would your eyes be if you’d been up all night on patrol.”

“Narbig and Holismus were out there too. How come you’re the only one with bloodshot eyes?”

Raufbold scowled for a moment, until inspiration crept across his devious features. He shook his prisoner by the collar. “I remember now. It was this little low life. He threw a handful of salt in my eyes. Yeah, that was it-I got salt in my eyes. Is that a crime now?”

Kurt jerked a thumb towards the crowded cage. “Stick him in there, if you can manage that.”

“As you command, captain!” Raufbold affected a limp-wristed salute before strolling away.

“And Raufbold?”

"Yes, captain?"

"I catch you using crimson shade on duty again, you'll spend the next ten years on Rijker's."

"Aye, aye, captain!"

Disgusted by Raufbold's insolence, Kurt strode out of the station and stood on the cobbles of Three Penny Bridge, stretching his arms out in a yawn. "What time do you call this?" a voice called out.

"Dawn on Backertag," Kurt replied, smiling as his sergeant strolled on to the span. "I thought you told the day shift to be here before dawn, so they'd be ready to relieve the graveyard crew."

Jan shrugged. "I kept getting stopped every ten paces, people asking me if it was true about the Black Caps reopening the station here. Apparently, we're offering a reward for information about who murdered that elf-a hundred golden guilders, if the rumours are to be believed."

"They're not, but I'll take any help I can get." Kurt clapped an arm round his sergeant's broad shoulders. "You grew up on the same passageway as Lea-Jan Cobbius, didn't you?"

"Yes, but that was a long time ago-why do you ask?" Kurt explained about the extortion racket run by Cobbius' murderous relative Abram, and about the promise made to Mrs. Vink. "So, you want to know if Lea-Jan will object to us arresting his cousin, yes?"

"Something like that."

The sergeant frowned. "It won't hurt to rattle Abram's cage, but Lea-Jan is another matter."

"That's what I thought. We'll have to tread carefully, for now," Kurt replied. "Speaking of cages, we've had a busy night here…" He led Jan inside and enjoyed the sergeant's curse of astonishment at the collection of miscreants, deserters and reprobates crowding the holding cell. "We need to get all those bound for Rijker's on a transport, and we also need to release anyone held overnight to sober up. That should create some space. Once you've done that, I suggest you get the remaining prisoners building the other three cages-under careful supervision, of course. Oh, and could somebody find some trousers for Winkie and Scratch? I was planning to have sausages for breakfast, but those two have put me right off."

"Right. Another busy day," Jan decided, before noticing Kurt staggering towards the east stairs. "Where are you going, captain?"

"To get some sleep. The first person to disturb me will be supping with Morr before sunset." Hans-Michael Mutig arrived a few minutes later, having marched halfway across Marienburg from his home in Kruiersmuur to reach the station. The sooner he found new sleeping quarters nearer Three Penny Bridge, the better. By rights, he should have felt aggrieved the likes of Scheusal and Holismus had been

chosen ahead of him to lead one of the shifts. But deep down, Mutig was secretly relieved. He hated responsibility, hated having other men on the watch look to him for guidance or leadership.

It had been the same all his adult life, thanks to his chiselled good looks and tendency to stand out from any crowd of men. People expected him to be a leader, as if his height and appearance were the sole measure of a man. Mutig could bluff his way through most situations as a Black Cap, due to the limited authority his uniform brought and the fact he stood half a head taller than most people he met.

At his first station, he had acquired a reputation for being a fearless, dangerous fighter. In truth he only used his club once in anger and that was against a man so drunk he could hardly stand. It had been Mutig's first full day at the station and he knew he needed to make a strong impression. So he found a tavern where the customers were inebriated beyond reason and picked a fight with the biggest, drunkest thug in the taproom. Mutig beat his assailant to a pulp and dragged the bloody mess back to the station, proof of his prowess and bravery. After that, word of his brutality and courage quickly spread among the local citizens and everyone knew better than to take on Mutig. What they didn't know was the Black Cap had spent an hour vomiting into a canal before entering the tavern, his gut and bowels churning with terror at the prospect of what he was about to do. Mutig was a coward and he knew it. But like stutterers who found new ways of suggesting words they couldn't say for themselves, Mutig had developed a defence mechanism to hide his churning, craven cowardice.

Every time he was assigned to a new station, Mutig used the same trick of beating a drunken bully as a shield for his own inner terrors. Today was the day he had to go through the ordeal again, and pray he found the right victim, someone who wouldn't be able to fight back, someone who wouldn't discover his innate weakness.

Get through today alive, and Mutig knew his future on Three Penny Bridge was secure. He could hide behind his appearance, make sure he was always one step behind when others volunteered for dangerous duties, always the last one into a tavern brawl to keep the peace. That way he stayed alive. That way nobody ever knew his dirty secret. Just get through today, Mutig told himself.

He walked into the station on Three Penny Bridge to find the place a madhouse of half naked men, angry citizens demanding a hundred golden guilders for what they knew and sundry other visitors being jostled about in the melee of people all fighting for attention. Mutig was about to back out when he bumped into a bleary-eyed Faulheit, stumbling in behind him. "Watch where you're going!" the

obese grouch growled at Mutig before taking in his height. “Oh, it’s you. Sorry, didn’t realise.”

Mutig wasn’t certain he heard Faulheit properly, such was the cacophony of shouting and arguing within the station. “What did you say?”

An empty glass bottle suddenly shattered behind the bar, effectively silencing the throng. Mutig spun round to see Sergeant Woxholt atop the bar, arms folded and determined of face. “That’s better!” he bellowed. “Now, who’s here to claim the reward money for information about the murdered elf?” Most of the citizens stabbed the air with eager hands. “Right. All of you need to go downstairs where you’ll be-” But the rest of his words were drowned out by the sudden surge of people towards the staircases that led down to the station’s lower level. Once the bulk of the throng had departed, Woxholt continued his speech. “As I was saying, those with information need to go downstairs where you’ll be interviewed by one of our Black Caps.” The sergeant scanned the room for recruits and spotted the two men lurking in the entrance. “Faulheit! You’re just in time. I’ve heard you can read and write.”

“A little,” Faulheit reluctantly agreed.

“That’ll do. You go downstairs and start taking statements.”

“But there must be a hundred people in the basement!”

“A hundred and twenty by my count, so don’t take all day about it. Remember, it’s up to Captain Schnell to decide who gets the reward. If you tell someone they’re definitely getting the golden guilders, it’ll be coming out of our wages for the next seventeen years- is that clear?”

“Yes, sergeant,” Faulheit said, continuing to mutter under his breath as he descended.

“Mutig!” Woxholt called.

“Yes, sergeant?”

“Once Winkie and Scratch have put on their trousers, you’re to take them home and wait while they explain to their wives where they’ve been all night and why they’re wearing borrowed clothes. Throw them in the Rijksweg if either man gives you any trouble. After that you’re on street patrol, right?”

“Yes, sergeant,” Mutig replied, breathing a sigh of relief. With any luck he could find a tavern on the way back where the customers had been drinking all night and were more than a little worse for wear. A few brutal blows with his club and his reputation as the hard man of Three Penny Bridge would be established. If only he could quell the queasy dread in the pit of his bowels. Mutig marched towards the two hung-over, half-naked prisoners, trying to put a brave face on his inner fears. Just get through the day.

CHAPTER NINE

The missive from the elves arrived not long after Belladonna that morning, delivered by a tight-lipped messenger from the elf quarter. He marched into the station as if he owned the place, intense eyes searching the faces of those within. “You!” he said, pointing an accusing finger at Belladonna. She was helping Sergeant Woxholt supervise construction of the new cells by prisoners, ensuring the workmanship was good enough for the job. “You were the female who guarded the body of our fallen brother yesterday!”

“Yes,” Belladonna admitted, trying to keep worry from her face. Had the elves discovered her conversation with the dead elf’s spirit? Had he resumed talking, even after she bade him to rest? She knew too little about their ways to assess the possibilities of this happening, and the messenger’s face was impassive, revealing nothing of his purpose. Belladonna kept her counsel, not wishing to volunteer anything that might worsen the situation. Bad enough having an elf murdered on your watch, let alone announcing you had resurrected his spirit and interrogated it for clues to the killer’s identity.

“This is a missive from the House of Silvermoon. You will read it-aloud!” The messenger produced a scroll of thick, yellow parchment tied with black ribbon, and handed it to her. She glanced at the sergeant, but all he did was shrug watching carefully from one side. Belladonna slid the ribbon from the parchment and unrolled the page, gripping it top and bottom and hoping her hands wouldn’t shake.

“The House of Silvermoon seeks answers to the unresolved questions stemming from the violent murder of Arullen Silvermoon, after he was lured from the elf quarter by a person or persons unknown. Such answers must be presented to the House of Silvermoon before the end of the intercalary holiday known as Day of Mystery, or else there shall be an irredeemable breakdown in relations between those within the Sith Rionnasc’namishathir and those beyond its walls. Heed this missive well.” Belladonna checked both sides of the parchment, but that was the sum total of its information. She looked to the messenger. “We know nothing more about Arullen’s murder-yet.”

“Then you have until five sunsets hence to discover the truth,” the elf replied sternly. He bowed his head to her and dutifully acknowledged the sergeant’s presence before marching from the station.

“Charming,” Woxholt observed dryly. “Why do I get the feeling we haven’t heard the last of this?”

“Because we haven’t,” Kurt commented as he came down the east

stairs. “The elves are a proud people, but they know we represent the best chance of discovering who murdered Arullen. If they keep the pressure on us, it improves the likelihood we’ll concentrate on that particular crime.”

“I thought you were going to sleep?” the sergeant asked.

“I did.”

“Two hours is not enough rest, even for you.”

“It’ll have to do,” Kurt said, “Besides, the noise from the basement woke me up. Have any of our eager informants actually told us anything useful yet?”

Woxholt shrugged. “I’ll go and find out, if you and Belladonna keep watch over the prisoners.” After a nod from Kurt, the sergeant disappeared downstairs, his booming voice commanding silence from those below. Once he had gone, the captain joined Belladonna by the new cages. Three were now complete and the enforced labourers were hard at work on the final enclosure.

“We have to stop meeting like this,” she said, her eyes smiling at him.

“Don’t,” he replied.

“Don’t what?” Belladonna asked, her voice all innocence. Kurt took her roughly by the arm and pulled her across to the station entrance. “You’re hurting me,” she complained, tearing her arm free.

“Don’t flirt with me, and don’t pretend not to realise you’re doing it, either,” Kurt warned. “I’m captain of this station.” He pointed at the citizens making their way past on the cobbles, several of them peering interestedly into the station. “My first and last priority are the people who work here, and the people beyond these walls we’ve sworn to protect. I don’t have time for games or pretence. Given the choice, I wouldn’t have a woman among my Black Caps, but Otto persuaded me to give you a chance and Jan said much the same. You’ve proven you have talents the other recruits don’t possess, and that makes you an asset to this station. But you’ll never be anything more than that to me, understand?”

“You do like making speeches, don’t you? You should be a politician, not a Black Cap.”

Even Kurt had to smile at her comment. “Please don’t put that curse on me.”

“Fine,” Belladonna replied. “I’ll do as you ask. But don’t expect me to change who I am, either.”

“Agreed,” he said with a sigh.

“Captain Schnell?” an authoritative voice asked. “Captain Kurt Schnell?” Belladonna looked over Kurt’s shoulder to see a wealthily dressed, middle-aged man strutting towards the station entrance. His broad girth and double chins spoke of a life lived in luxury, while the

red-veined nose and silver-topped cane suggested a strong fondness for drink, affectation and possibly a case of gout, the rich man's disease. The ornate robes and other finery screamed the obvious: the new arrival was well off and he wanted everyone to know it. "I have a delivery for you."

Kurt's face had soured in the time it took Belladonna to study the newcomer. "Who from?"

"Perhaps we could speak inside?" the visitor suggested, gesturing grandly at their surroundings. "Somewhere away from prying eyes, where we might converse in private, as between two men."

"Whatever you have to say to me can be said in plain view of the street," Kurt said.

"So be it. My name is Oosterlee, Theodorus Oosterlee-perhaps you've heard of me?"

Kurt shook his head, but the name certainly jarred a memory for Belladonna. Five years ago the Oosterlee family had been one of Marienburg's leading importers and exporters of premium goods-the finest spices from Araby, the best silks from the Orient, all the wealth of the New World could be had for an appropriate price from an Oosterlee emporium. But the family had fallen upon hard times and tumbled from grace following a series of damaging scandals. Theodorus Oosterlee had gambled away his legacy and been forced to take on silent partners, men apparently far less scrupulous than his father had ever been. Oosterlee had remained in place as the respectable face of the business, but word among the well to do suggested the business was little more than a front for the worst smugglers and brigands. In Marienburg, that almost invariably led to one man-Adalbert Henschmann. Belladonna cleared her throat, trying to get the captain's attention, but he chose to ignore her.

"Perhaps not," Oosterlee conceded when Kurt did not reply to his question. "Never mind. I represent a particular group of businessmen who trade from these parts of the city. They have asked me to approach you about coming to an arrangement, a kind of sponsorship for your station. One might go so far as to call it patronage-in the old fashioned, benevolent sense of the word, of course."

"Of course," Kurt agreed, his voice remaining noncommittal.

Oosterlee seemed heartened by this response, but still felt the need to wipe the sweat from his brow. "Remarkably close for so early, isn't it?"

"I find the morning breeze quite cooling," Kurt growled, taking a step closer to his visitor. "You mentioned something about an arrangement."

"Yes, absolutely right-business first, that's the way to do it," Oosterlee clucked. "My associates and I would like to offer you a gift,

an appreciation if you will for the services your station will be offering to the citizens of Suiddock." He giggled like a little girl, fresh beads of sweat already forming on his brow. Trying to deflect attention from himself, he ran a gloved finger over the flaking whitewash on the walls of the station exterior. "You could use the money to give this place a lick of paint, spruce it up a little, hmm?"

Kurt took another step nearer to Oosterlee, looming over the obese man. "How much?"

"I'm sorry?"

"How much… appreciation… are your masters willing to show us?"

Oosterlee swallowed hard, struggling to maintain his composure. "I'm not sure what you-"

"How much money?" Kurt snapped, a vicious tone to his words. "Show me how much they've sent along here with their little lapdog."

"I say, there's no need to become abusive, my friend. I'm simply here-"

"I'm not your friend, Oosterlee. Scum like you turn my stomach, pathetic lapdogs running around, doing their master's bidding, desperate to please him, even more desperate to collect the scraps from his table, to feast on the leavings of parasites who suck this city dry." Kurt grabbed Oosterlee's rich clothes. He rooted around in the fat man's pockets for several seconds before producing a leather pouch bulging with coins. "Is this the appreciation you were mentioning, by any chance?"

"Well, I didn't want to-"

"Is it?" Kurt snarled, his face so close to Oosterlee their noses were touching.

"Yes," the messenger squeaked. Kurt released him and Oosterlee staggered backwards on the cobbles of Three Penny Bridge. He watched in dismay as Kurt emptied the pouch of golden guilders into one hand. "Obviously, if that isn't enough I'm sure my associates would be more than happy to-"

"Who wants to be rich?" Kurt bellowed at all those on the bridge. "Who wants a taste of this man's wealth? Who wants a golden guilder, courtesy of Theodorus Oosterlee and his corrupt masters?"

Belladonna glanced around. All those on the bridge had come to a halt, bemused by the sudden outburst from the captain of the Black Caps. Their expressions soon changed as Kurt threw the handful of golden coins high into the air. Before the first fistful had come back down, Kurt emptied the rest of the pouch into his hand and tossed it into the sky. A moment later golden guilders were raining down on Three Penny Bridge, coins bouncing off the road. In the blink of an eye everybody was on their knees, scrabbling among the animal

droppings and stone cobbles, grabbing every coin they could get their fingers on. Oosterlee let out a shriek of dismay and threw himself on the ground, trying feebly to reclaim what he had brought with him. Molly and several of her girls came running out of the temple, not too proud to grab a guilder. The man from the fish market on the other side of the station also abandoned his place of business to chase the windfall. Only Kurt and Belladonna stayed standing, both watching the greedy spectacle around them.

When the last of the coins had been collected and the excitement was over, Oosterlee was still crawling around on the cobbles, frantically searching for any remaining guilders. Kurt stepped in his way, forcing the obese businessman to look up. “Captain Schnell-I’m sorry, I didn’t realise-”

Kurt snapped his right knee forward, so it rammed into Oosterlee’s many chins. The grovelling man tipped over backwards, landing with a heavy thud in the gutter streaming with urine and faeces. When Oosterlee tried to get up, Kurt pinned him back down beneath a leather boot. “Now, you listen, Theodorus-I’ve got a message for your masters at the League of Gentleman Entrepreneurs, or whatever grand title they choose to call themselves. I won’t be bought and I won’t be bargained with. Kurt Schnell is not for sale, not for gold, not for ale, not for crimson shade and not for anything else scum like Adalbert Henschmann might have to offer. I’m here to do a job, plain and simple. If they stay out of my way, I’ll stay out of their way. But if one more slug like you comes back here, trying to slither their way into my affections, I’ll be forced to take drastic action. I hope that’s not too much for you to remember.”

Oosterlee shook his head, terror etched into his chubby features.

“Then slime your way back to the Marienburg Gentlemen’s Club and tell Casanova what I said.” Kurt removed his boot from Oosterlee’s chest and stalked back into the station. The sergeant was waiting inside, his face stern and unforgiving. Seeing his expression, Belladonna went back to supervising the prisoners while they finished the last of the caged cells.

“Was that wise?” Jan demanded of Kurt. “We don’t have the men to take on Henschmann and his cronies. We’ve got two murders to solve, the elves breathing down our necks and Cobbius to deal with.”

“Henschmann started it, you know he did-getting his thugs to dump a cartload of dead pigs outside the station, sending that bloated warthog Oosterlee here to bribe me.”

“There’s a time and a place for all things,” Jan insisted in a low voice. “You’re starting too many fires and you’re leaving us to put them out. And the fuse on your temper hasn’t gotten any longer has it?”

“A wise man once told me that people never change, they only become more so.”

“What idiot said that?”

Kurt smiled. “You did, Jan.” The sergeant shook his head despairingly. “What news from those people in the basement, eager to collect the reward money?”

“Pretty much what you’d expect,” he replied. “Plenty of petty squabbles between neighbours, accusations of adultery and bigamy, and fingers being pointed. Merchants who have lead in the bottom of their scales, fishmongers who claim that yesterday’s catch is still fresh off the boat. These people haven’t had anybody who’ll listen to their complaints for the best part of five years, so Faulheit’s been getting it all.”

“Anything useful? Anybody mention Fingers Blake or Abram Cobbius?”

“A few believed Blake may have lifted their money pouch but none of them can prove it. Nobody seems to know where he lives and nobody has seen him for at least a day, if not longer.”

“And Cobbius?” Kurt asked. “What about him?”

Jan sighed. “If you believe what people are saying about him, he’s like the plague, infecting everything and everyone he goes near. He’s been bragging about what he did to Vink, saying its proof that nobody can touch him. The citizens are terrified of Abram Cobbius. As far as they’re concerned, he’s completely untouchable, protected from on high by his cousin Lea-Jan.”

“We need to prove them wrong. Arrest Abram and it shows we mean business.”

“Arrest Abram and you’ll get us killed,” the sergeant hissed. “I don’t want to die in this place!”

Kurt stared at his oldest friend in Marienburg. “You mean that, don’t you?”

“Of course I mean it.”

“No, you believe you’re going to die here, on Three Penny Bridge.”

Jan didn’t answer, but his pained expression was eloquent enough.

“Why?” Kurt asked.

“I had my fortune read on Mitterfruhl,” the sergeant admitted. “Everything the seer said has come true-my retirement, you asking me for help, coming here. She said if I did as you asked and we arrested a powerful man with a broken nose, one of us would die.”

“Superstitious nonsense! And you believed her? How much did you pay this seer?”

“She wouldn’t take my money, said it wouldn’t be right. Told me

to keep it for funeral expenses."

Kurt shook his head. "I'm not changing my mind to avoid the predictions of some gap-toothed old crone, no matter how well she fooled you. She was probably working for Cobbius herself."

"You only broke his nose yesterday, remember?" Jan prompted. "The seer told me all this long before you were offered the chance to become captain on Three Penny Bridge."

"I don't care," Kurt insisted. "Arresting Abram Cobbius is the most important thing we can do right now. It will send a signal to everyone, citizens and criminals, show them that we're serious. If we want to be anything more than a joke in Suiddock, we have to take on the worst this district has to offer."

"You're making a mistake," Jan said. "Letting your anger get the better of you again, Kurt."

"I'd prefer it if you called me Captain Schnell when we're on duty," Kurt snapped. "You may have been my mentor in the past, but I outrank you now, remember?"

"Yes, captain."

"That's better. It's time you got out on the streets. Go and see how Mutig is coping with his first patrol. While you're looking for him, ask around about where we can find Abram Cobbius too."

Jan came to attention and saluted his former pupil before marching from the station. Kurt caught Belladonna looking at him in bewilderment. "Don't start on me," he warned. "I'm not in the mood." Mutig spent the morning searching for a suitable target to meet his needs. The most promising tavern appeared to be Vollmer's Rest, a hostelry on the northern edge of Stoessel with a broad wooden balcony overlooking the Rijksweg. Mutig had seen half a dozen men stagger into the tavern already well on their way to oblivion, and none of them had managed to stagger back out.

Once the sun had passed its highest point of the day, the Black Cap ventured a look in the tavern's grease-smeared windows. The most promising recipient for a trouble-free thrashing was slumped against the taproom bar, black rings under both eyes, an ugly swelling in the centre of his face where a nose should have been. It looked like somebody had already made a start on him, but he was obviously still in charge of the drunken rabble slouching around him, judging by the way they laughed at his jokes and deferred to him physically. He was big and he was ugly, with a broad chest and narrow, porcine eyes. An oil painting, he was not. There was something vaguely familiar about him, but the Black Cap couldn't recall why. It probably didn't matter.

Mutig felt confident he could knock this buffoon insensible with a single blow, but decided to use his lead-encased cosh for extra safety. No point starting a fight unless you had the weapons to finish it.

Stepping back from the window, he admired his own reflection in the glass, adjusting the tilt of his black cap. Yes, the streets of Suiddock would soon echo in wonder at the name Hans-Michael Mutig. Once his reputation as the newest hard man in the district was secure, he need never fight again. All he had to do now was find somewhere to empty his protesting bowels and the fun could begin in earnest.

Five minutes later Mutig strolled into Vollmer's Rest and waited for the inhabitants to pay attention to him. Instead they were focused on their leader, who was pouring ale down his throat and bragging about how his cousin would show some upstart the meaning of true power. The cheek of that gutless whelp, evicting them from their own private taproom! Well, they'd change their minds, soon enough. "Hey!" Mutig shouted, determined to make a strong, first impression. "Which one of you scum wants to prove what a big man he is?" He strode through the cluster of glowering drunks, heading straight for the bar and the braggart propping it up. "You look a likely candidate," Mutig told the inebriated thug with the broken nose. "How about I teach you a lesson you'll never forget?"

Mutig never knew what hit him. He heard the sound of wood splintering and something else, like an egg cracking open. The next thing he knew was intense pain, closely followed by inky darkness. Faulheit finished interviewing the last of the would-be informants by midday. He reported his limited findings to Kurt before asking permission to go and get something to eat. He sauntered back into the station moments later with a pie from a stall that had opened on the other side of the bridge. "The owner heard about your tendency to toss golden guilders around and decided to try their luck, in the hope of a repeat performance," Faulheit explained when Kurt came downstairs, lured by the scent of hot meat. "I think it's the first new business to take residence on Three Penny Bridge since the station last closed."

"Good. That means we're starting to make a difference," Kurt said, licking his lips. He sniffed the air appreciatively, his eyes lingering on Faulheit's lunch. "What's in the pie?"

"Long pig and chestnut, apparently. Never had long pig before, it's rather tasty."

Belladonna returned from ushering the last disappointed citizen out of the station. None of the informants had earned the mythical pouch of golden guilders and most were even less impressed to discover the captain had been throwing coins around in the street outside. She too was entranced by the delicious aroma of Faulheit's lunch. "What flavour did you say that was?"

He sighed, frustrated that these constant questions were stopping him from actually eating any of the pie that was exciting such interest.

“For the last time, it’s long pig and chestnut.”

The colour quickly drained from Belladonna’s face. “Did you say… long pig?”

“For the love of Manann, yes!”

Kurt noticed the sudden change in her features. “What’s wrong?”

“Long pig-I’ve heard that’s what savages in the New World call the people they eat.” Belladonna bolted for the front door, just getting outside in time to empty her stomach on to the cobbles. Inside Faulheit was staring at his partially eaten pie with growing horror.

“You don’t think this is… That it’s got bits of…” He threw the rest of the pie aside. It rolled across the floor and came to rest against the nearest cell. One of the prisoners grabbed it and scoffed down the remaining chunks of meat and pastry. That was too much for Faulheit. He bolted for the door, joining Belladonna outside as they retched up their stomach contents with alacrity.

Kurt marched past them, pausing only to order Faulheit to throw a bucket of water over the cobbles once they’d finished vomiting. The captain crossed over the bridge to confront the pie seller, a ruddy-faced man with red hair, red freckles and a red smock stood beside a wooden cart.

“Hello, captain!” the stallholder said. “I’ve heard all about you, I have-quite the celebrity you’re becoming all over Suiddock and so quickly, too -who’d have thought it, eh? Would you like to try one of my pies? You’d never know there was a fresh meat shortage after you’ve tasted one of my pies. I’ve got some exciting new flavours I’ve been trying out: garlic and gristle; turnip and water vole; long pig and-” The captain grabbed hold of the cart and violently tipped it over, spilling the pies across the cobbles. “Here, what in Sigmar’s beard do you think you’re doing?”

Kurt picked up one of the pies, holding it distastefully between his fingers. “What flavour is this?”

“Long pig and chestnut,” the stallholder said proudly. “That’s been my best seller today.”

“And where do you get the long pig for your pies?”

“There’s a cutter on the docks, called the Grey Sail, brings it in fresh for me from the ocean every week. Wish he could bring me more, but I think most of his trade is arms shipments these days, what with the war and everything. The fresh meat always sells out first, what with supplies being so hard to-”

Kurt offered half the pie to the freckled man. “Try it for yourself, tell me what you think that tastes like.” The stallholder bit deep into the pastry case and masticated happily, his brow furrowed in thought.

“Well, it’s meaty, obviously. A bit like pork, actually, but with some other flavour as well.”

When Kurt told him what long pig was, the stallholder didn't believe him at first. But after a few moments a look of quiet horror passed over his face and he hastily flung the rest of the pie down on the bridge.

"You mean I've been selling… all this time it's been… oh my stars…"

"What cargo does the Grey Sail take over the ocean when it sails out?"

"Explorers, traders, merchants, adventurers-you know the sort."

"And have you ever seen any of these people come back?"

"No, but I suppose they decided to stay out there. Takes a long time to see the New World, I'm told. Sea trips can take months or years, so I've heard."

"If the journey takes so long, how can the Grey Sail be there and back again every week, hmm?"

The stallholder was about to answer, but realised he couldn't. "I don't know, now you mention it."

Belladonna had recovered enough to join Kurt beside the upset wooden cart. "Well?"

"A vessel called the Grey Sail has been offering trips to the New World," Kurt replied. "But instead of giving people the experience of a lifetime, I'm guessing they're taken out to sea, slaughtered and brought back to port as fresh cuts of long pig." He studied the queasy-faced stallholder. "Who owns the Grey Sail?"

"Captain Marius is in charge on board, but I think it's owned by Abram Cobbius."

Kurt grimaced. "Quite the little empire he's running around here."

"I suspect we don't know the half of it," Belladonna said. "But whatever happens on the Grey Sail is a wet crime-not our jurisdiction. Have you got friends in the River Watch who can deal with that?"

The captain nodded. "He owes me a favour, too. I'll send a message suggesting he investigate the Grey Sail. The sooner we start turning the screws on Cobbius and his illegal businesses, the better."

"He's not used to being challenged, Kurt. He won't respond well," she warned.

"Don't you start, I had enough of that from Jan. Besides, I want Abram Cobbius angry and off balance. That way he'll make a mistake sooner, overstep the mark-and then we've got grounds to arrest him. Once that happens, a few hours in an interrogation cell will soon get the truth about what he did to Vink. I want this animal sent to Rijker's for so long, he rots out there." When Mutig regained his senses, he could smell where he was better than he could see it. Everything around him was a blur, as if someone had smeared grease across his eyeballs. He could hear the sound of gruff murmurings and laughter in

the distance, but did not recognise the voices at first. But the smell that filled his nostrils, that he knew all too well. Stale ale and sawdust, pipe smoke and a cold sweat of abject terror all hung in the air like an early evening mist that had rolled in from the sea. There was another scent mixed in, the distinctive tangy aroma of urine. Somebody had lost control of their bladder. Mutig let his head sink down on to his chest. His vision was still a mass of oscillating and undulating blurs and shapes, but he could make out a dark stain around the crotch and thighs of his uniform. He was the somebody that had lost control of their bladder. His shame was complete.

He tried to cover himself but found his arms were bound behind his back, the ropes so tight they had cut off the circulation to his arms, making them feel like useless lumps of lead. His legs were also bound to the chair in which he was sitting equally unable to move. More ropes lashed his torso in place so he couldn't do anything but strain uselessly against them. When he tried, it served only to alert the murmuring voices nearby that he had become conscious once more. "You can't keep me prisoner here," he said, surprised how weak and feeble his words sounded, stricken with terror. Mutig licked his lips, trying to get some moisture on the cracked, bloodied skin. "Everyone at the station knows the route for my patrol. They'll come looking for me if I'm not back soon."

"Let them come," a voice full of gravel and sneering replied. The speaker was standing directly in front of Mutig but the Black Cap couldn't make out his features. He squinted, trying to bring his eyes into focus, but the effort sent a stabbing pain through his fractured skull. "What's the matter, boy?"

"Can't see you," Mutig said, becoming increasingly aware of tautness in his chest. He didn't know if it was muscular, driven by fear or something worse. "Who are you?"

The speaker leaned closer, until his rancid breath was all the Black Cap could smell. It was the bully with the black rings under his eyes and the broken nose, the person Mutig had tried challenging to a fight. "My name is Abram Cobbius, you pathetic little worm." Cobbius pointed a finger at his shattered proboscis. "See this? Your captain did that to me yesterday. I'm not surprised you didn't recognise me when you came in here. My face looks like I should be floating in the water near Doodkanaal!"

Mutig's breath caught in his throat when he heard the name of his captor. Of all the people he could have chosen to confront, fate had somehow led him to one of Suiddock's most notorious sadists. "If you torture me, the captain will see you executed for it," he said, his words braver than his heart.

Cobbius merely laughed, his men eagerly joining in the hilarity.

“Torture you? What a wonderful idea, I hadn’t thought of that. I was just going to dump your body on the cutter of my acquaintance and have you turned into choice cuts of long pig. I love a nice piece of long pig. But you’ve given me-” His words were stopped by the sound of running feet approaching and the tavern door bursting inwards. “Marius? What are you doing running in here like the wolves of Ulric are after you? This tavern’s closed-or can’t you read the sign outside?”

A voice Mutig didn’t recognise replied, bearing the cultured accent of a Bretonnian. “The River Watch, they’ve seized the Grey Sail and are searching the hold. I only escaped because I was on dry land at the time, making a delivery to the meat market.”

“Why are the River Watch interested in my ship?” Cobbius demanded, anger rising in his words.

“They know what we’ve been doing on board! I overheard some of them talking on the dock when I crept closer. Somebody must have told them.”

“You mean they know what you’ve been doing on board. I own the Grey Sail, but I leased it to you, Marius. You’re the captain, you take the blame for everything that happens on board.”

“But I was following your orders, Cobbius!”

“That’s your word against mine, and I’ve got my cousin to back me up.”

“I’ve never met your cousin,” Marius protested.

“Yes, you have. He was a witness when I leased you the Grey Sail, remember?”

“No, that’s a lie!”

Mutig heard a sharp intake of breath from the other men in the tavern.

“Did you just call me a liar?” Cobbius asked, cold fury evident in his voice.

“No, I didn’t mean-”

“You called me a liar and you did it in front of my men, too.”

“Please, I was upset, I wasn’t trying to-”

“Nobody calls me a liar, you frog-faced Bretonnian body-snatcher!” Mutig heard something swift and sure flying through the air, before thudding deep into its target, the impact sounding like a carving knife slicing into the heart of a cabbage. Somebody choked and gurgled a few times, before falling heavily to the wooden floor. “Stick that in your pipe and smoke it, Marius!” The others laughed, their relief palpable in the confined, murderous atmosphere of the tavern.

Mutig swallowed hard, fearing the worst. If that was how Cobbius dealt with employees who displeased him, how in the name of Manann would he treat a member of the Watch? The answer was not

long in coming, but the Black Cap found no comfort in his captor's words.

"Now, where was I before that fool interrupted me?"

"Torture," one of the others prompted.

"That's right, torture," Cobbius agreed. He leaned forwards, his face looming in focus before Mutig's terrified, tear-filled eyes. "Tell me, can you read and write?"

"Y-Yes," the watchman replied. "A l-little."

"That's good. Education is important. I often wished I'd made the effort to learn more." The others laughed at this, enjoying their master's good humour. He shushed them into silence before resuming his close questioning of Mutig. "So, my unwelcome guest-which hand do you write with, hmm?"

"My right hand," Mutig whimpered, unable to hold back his fear any longer.

"Somebody lend me a knife," Cobbius said to the room. "And make it a sharp one. Don't want to be hacking away all afternoon, now, do we? I'm sure this Black Cap has places to go, things to do."

Mutig started screaming and didn't stop for an hour.

CHAPTER TEN

Lothar Holismus thought he was dreaming, his consciousness replaying the nightmare that had plagued him for years, tormenting him with the past. His brother Joost would appear in Lothar's sleep, whispering in the younger man's ears, telling him about the salvation to be had by becoming one with Chaos. Lothar had worshipped his elder brother, looked up to him as a father figure. Lothar had never known his real father, and with Joost being so many years older, it was only natural for Joost to fill that role in the Holismus household. Joost was everything Lothar wanted to be-brave, a charismatic leader, a well-respected figure across Suiddock. When Joost was made captain of the station on Three Penny Bridge, it was the proudest day of Lothar's young life. He had been among the citizens who stood outside the station when it opened, cheering as the new captain announced his intention to make the district safe for honest, decent, hard-working men and women of Marienburg.

Joost's breakdown was not long in coming. He spent more and more time at the station, until the rest of the Holismus family did not see him for months at a time. Lothar heard whispers his elder brother was unwell, even unstable, making decisions that defied belief and endangering the lives of Black Caps assigned to Three Penny Bridge.

The youth came home early one day and found his mother sobbing in the kitchen, clutching a scrap of paper covered in blood, only four words visible on it: Save me, your son. The writing was close to illegible, but Lothar could still recognise his brother's hand. After comforting their mother, Lothar ran to the station to confront Joost. He arrived in time to see Joost mortally wound one of the Black Caps, before the deranged captain took a dagger to his own face. The last anyone saw of Joost Holismus was when he dove off Three Penny Bridge and never resurfaced.

But Lothar was haunted by visions of his brother every night, and followed by whispers about Joost's surrender to the dark tyranny of Chaos. To know your sibling, the person you had worshipped, could slaughter innocent lives and commit suicide, all in the name of Chaos… It had been too much for Lothar. He took to drinking, drowning his sorrows, blotting out reality.

After one particular binge he woke to find himself a member of the Watch, having signed up for ten years in the Black Caps during a drunken stupor. Since then he had staggered from one station to the next, disgracing his family name and the uniform he wore. Lothar did not dare sleep without the aid of alcohol, for when he slept sober Joost would appear in his dreams, taunting and tormenting him. The

once noble face was a horrific parody of itself, the features warped and twisted, the lips contorted, the tongue inside that hissing, spitting mouth a black and suppurating apparition, as if a serpent lived inside Joost now. So Lothar drank himself to sleep every night and kept the daemon at bay, blocking out his brother's spectral presence with ale and anything stronger.

When Lothar arrived at Three Penny Bridge, he knew this was his last chance for redemption. How ironic, it should come at the place that apparently drove his brother to shame and suicide, and that had destroyed his mother. The apothecary said she died of a heart attack, but Lothar knew it was a broken heart that claimed her.

As he set foot inside the station, Lothar made a silent pact with himself. He would not drink, no matter how things got, no matter how much his nightmares tormented him. If he didn't want to end up like Joost, he had to put the bottle aside and make a new life for himself. Lothar was grateful when Sergeant Woxholt suggested his name for the graveyard shift, hoping that sleeping in daytime might keep Joost's ghost at bay. When he staggered upstairs with Raufbold and Narbig to the newly installed sleeping quarters at the back of the station, Lothar even let himself hope for his first real sleep in years. No hangover when he woke up, no pounding headache in the middle of his slumber. Just close your eyes and rest, for the first time in such a long, long time.

"I can lead you to salvation," the voice had whispered, sibilant and coaxing.

"Leave me be," Lothar muttered in his sleep, tossing and turning.

"Accept salvation and you shall never know pain or fear again."

"I said leave me be!" Lothar shouted, waking with a start. He sat bolt upright in bed, convinced he would find Joost's wraith-like presence looming over him. Instead all he saw were the surly faces of Raufbold and Narbig unhappy at having been woken up.

"Put a boot in it, Holismus," Raufbold snarled from his bed in the opposite corner. "Otherwise I'll come over there and do it for you, understand?" The murderous look on Narbig's face suggested he was more than willing to assist.

"Sorry," Lothar murmured. "Bad dream, I guess."

"Go back to sleep," Narbig hissed, before turning over and facing away from Holismus. Raufbold did the same, muttering further threats and curses under his breath.

Lothar lay back down on his bed, feeling the pounding of his heart slowly easing. There was a window behind his mattress, overlooking the Bruynwarr and southern Suiddock, but they had hung a blanket over it to block out the daylight. Lothar thought he saw a shadow fall over the blanket, but knew that was impossible. The

sleeping quarters were on the upper floor of the station. Outside the window was nothing but a straight drop down into the cut that linked the Bruynwarr with the Rijksweg. There was no ledge, no balcony, nothing to stand on even if someone had been crazed enough to clamber sideways across the station exterior from one of the adjoining buildings. Light danced across the blanket again, catching Lothar's eye. It was probably just a gull, hovering outside, casting shadows across the window.

"Accept salvation…" the voice whispered.

"Hey, did you hear that?" Lothar called out. "Jorg Joachim-did you hear that voice?"

"What voice?" Narbig replied wearily.

"We didn't hear any damned voice," Raufbold growled. "Go to sleep, for the love of Manann!"

But Lothar couldn't sleep, dared not sleep. He knew his brother was back, lurking at the edge of his dreams, waiting to reveal himself. All he could do now was wait for him to return.

"Accept salvation and you shall never know pain or fear again," the voice hissed at him.

Now convinced the voice was whispering to him from beyond the window, Lothar twisted around on the bed. His hand trembling he reached towards a corner of the blanket. As his fingers touched the coarse, scratchy fabric, sunlight bathed the window and the clear silhouette of a human head appeared on the blanket. Willing himself on, Lothar lifted back the material and saw a face staring at him, eyes blazing malevolently, the mouth a cruel parody of a smile. Water dripped from the warped, twisted features and a black tongue slithered and snaked about those contorted, ugly lips. "Join me, brother," Joost Holismus whispered. "Join me and know salvation as I have known it. Become one with Chaos, Lothar!"

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"He called me what?" Henschmann snarled at the cowering figure on the floor in front of him. "Did you say that whelp Schnell called me Casanova? In front of everyone on Three Penny Bridge?" Oosterlee looked up long enough to hurriedly nod confirmation of this fact before returning his attention to the floorboards beneath his flabby legs. "He shall pay for insulting me like this. I will make the insolent upstart understand that I command Suiddock and all who reside or work here-they do so at my say and under my sufferance. Anyone who

dares call me by that name again shall suffer an egregious, ignominious death!"

Oosterlee wished the wooden floor would swallow him up, rather than having to remain where he was and listen to Henschmann's rantings. It was embarrassing enough being forced to act as a messenger boy for a common criminal, however powerful that criminal might be-the scion of a once formidable merchant family should never be so humiliated. But it was frightfully unnerving to have to prostrate himself on the floor in front of this raving psychopath, especially since Oosterlee knew what Henschmann was prone to doing when presented with an idle or unwelcome report.

No matter that Adalbert was Master of the League of Gentlemen Entrepreneurs, his philosophy in such matters could best be summarised by three simple yet heart-stopping words: garrotte the messenger. Now Oosterlee was the messenger and Henschmann was positively spitting with rage, the veins on his neck and temples bulging alarmingly.

The ranting continued for several more minutes before burning itself out. Henschmann sunk into a chair at the far end of the Directorate's meeting table, leaving the unfortunate Oosterlee still clinging to the floor by the door. "However, it would not do to strike this Schnell down directly. I have made certain assurances and thus the new captain must be allowed to hang himself, if possible. Better to make him suffer by serving punishment upon one of his recruits. Do you have any suggestions?"

Oosterlee realised he was being asked a question and popped his head back up. "Suggestions?"

"Yes, I need to know which of Schnell's Black Caps I should punish in his stead."

"There was a woman with him-young, rather striking, quite beautiful in her way. I'm sure her suffering would be of great torment to the captain, if you so chose."

"I would, but until lately she was the apple of the commander's eye. To hurt her might be interpreted more as a stab at his heart, instead of a dagger to the spirit of Captain Schnell. No, it will have to be one of the others. Did you see any other suitable candidates?"

Oosterlee shook his head, not daring to say any more.

"Very well," Henschmann decided, standing up once more. "I shall leave the final choice to one of my enforcers. Better to delegate the responsibility in any case. Deniable culpability, and all that nonsense."

"Indeed."

Henschmann paused beside the craven figure on his floor. "Well? What are you waiting for, slug?"

“There was one other element of the report I have thus far failed to convey.”

“Sigmar’s beard, man! Try speaking in plain words, for once in your fat, indigent existence.”

“Yes, of course. It’s about the golden guilders you gave me as a gift for the captain…”

“What have you done with my coins?” Henschmann scowled.

“Schnell tore them from my hands and threw them all into the air. I tried to recover them, but the vast majority were taken by the scum that frequent Three Penny Bridge in daylight.” Oosterlee reached into a pocket and produced three, lonely guilders. “That was all I recovered, I regret to say.”

“Then they shall be your payment.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Swallow them.”

“But you said if I did as you asked, you would forgive my debts.”

Henschmann’s face darkened. “You singularly failed to achieve any of the tasks I sent you to do. As of this moment, your debts have doubled-due compensation for your spectacular failure.”

“Doubled?” Oosterlee quailed, his voice close to breaking.

“I will allow you to keep those three guilders, if you swallow them. Here. Now.”

The prostrate man stared at the coins in his fat, sweaty fist. “In that case, I’ll have to decline your generous offer and leave the guilders here with you.”

“It was not an offer, Oosterlee. It was an order. Swallow them. Now.” Henschmann watched as his minion tried to swallow the first coin. Within moments Oosterlee was choking the golden guilder caught in his windpipe, refusing to descend any further. He coughed and spluttered, his breath fast becoming a desperate wheeze for help. “What’s that?” Henschmann asked. “Having trouble getting it down?” Oosterlee nodded, his face turning purple as feeble fingers clutched at his throat, miming for a drink. Henschmann picked up a silver goblet of white wine and poured it over Oosterlee’s head, laughing as the liquid burned its way into the dying man’s eyes. “Helga, could you come in here? I believe my guest needs assistance.”

The big, butch bodyguard stomped into the meeting room, her sour face curdling with disdain at the sight of Oosterlee losing consciousness on the floor. “Did you have to do that in here?” she asked.

“Help me… p-please…” Oosterlee gasped, his hands going into spasm. His body jerked and twitched once, twice-and no more. A pool of yellow liquid oozed out from beneath the corpse as Oosterlee’s muscles relaxed and his bladder emptied its waste.

“See?” she said, pointing at the mess on the floorboards. “Not only do I have to get rid of this fat lump, now I have to mop up after him. It would have been much easier if you’d left him to me.”

“But where would the fun be in that?” Henschmann wondered aloud. “Toss that carcass out the privy chamber downstairs.”

The privy chamber was a set of doors on the ground floor of the Marienburg Gentlemen’s Club, supposedly leading to the bar’s water-closet. In fact they opened directly on to the Bruynwarr, giving drunken newcomers an unpleasant surprise once they passed beyond the doors. “It strikes me that I need another set of eyes and ears inside Three Penny Bridge station.”

Helga frowned. “That weasel Bescheiden isn’t enough?”

“He’ll sell himself to the highest bidder. I need someone who’s loyal without question, if needed.”

The bodyguard stroked her chin thoughtfully. “One of the Black Caps posted there buys crimson shade from our dealers. Control his supply and you control him, body and soul.”

Henschmann smiled appreciatively at the irony of this suggestion. “Excellent. What’s his name?”

“Calls himself Gorgeous Jorg.” Scheusal was not due on duty until sunset, but he returned to the station early, hoping to enjoy some more of Gerta’s cooking. The woman had quickly become a favourite among the Black Caps on Three Penny Bridge, partly due to her wild claims about all the crimes she’d committed but mostly thanks to her skills in the station’s rudimentary kitchen. She could transform the simplest of ingredients into a stew that set the mouth watering, while her herring broth and sourdough bread was beyond compare.

Besides, Scheusal was finding himself thinking about Gerta a lot since her arrival. Perhaps it was because Scheusal himself was built more like a beer barrel than a ship’s mast, but he’d always been partial to women with child-bearing hips and a rump you could get a good grip on. And then there was her smile, all rosy cheeks and dimples, with a smattering of comely freckles across her nose, framed by that lustrous hair. Scheusal quickened his pace as he approached the station and took the steps up to the first floor three at a time. So when he burst into the kitchen, he was more than dismayed to discover Bescheiden smiling sweetly at Gerta and asking for another helping of her dumplings.

“What did you say?” Scheusal demanded.

“He’s been enjoying my lovely dumplings,” Gerta explained with an innocent smile. She stopped stirring the casserole in a deep saucepan and lifted the lid off another bowl to reveal a cluster of suet dumplings, each one speckled with herbs and tender loving care. Two were missing from the dish, leaving half a dozen for whoever came off

duty next and needed a hot meal. But Bescheiden's gaze was fixed on Gerta's not inconsiderable dйcolletage, which threatened to spill from her top as she bent over the hot stove.

"I'll bet he was," Scheusal growled, his glare almost worth a charge of manslaughter. "It's good to see you in here so early for your next shift, little Willy."

"I told you not to call me that," Bescheiden protested. "It's not my fault I'm shorter than most."

"Who said I was talking about your height?" Scheusal replied.

Gerta tittered at the comment. "You two, always having a lark. I never know when you're serious!"

Scheusal sauntered past the chair where his colleague sat, taking care to crunch his boot heel down on Bescheiden's left foot. The little man gasped in pain, his eyes watering freely.

By now Gerta was busy chopping onions, but she still heard his strangled cry of agony. She looked over her shoulder and noticed the tears running down Bescheiden's face. "Oh, you poor thing. Chopping onions always makes me weep. Do they make you cry too?" He nodded manfully, waiting until Gerta turned away before making an obscene gesture with his fingers at Scheusal. The big man responded by wandering back to the door, carefully crushing Bescheiden's other foot as he passed this time.

"Yes, little Willy is quite the cry-baby. He bursts into tears every time the sun sets."

Gerta nodded approvingly, before returning to her task. "I like a man who isn't afraid to show his emotions. My beloved has always been completely honest with me about his feelings."

Bescheiden snorted in disbelief. The man whom Gerta claimed was her beloved had been one of Marienburg's most notorious womanisers before his arrest and incarceration on Rijker's Isle. Scheusal glared at his colleague and slid a warning finger across his throat, indicating what would happen if Bescheiden dared tell Gerta the truth about Engelbert Humpalot, as he was known among Black Caps. The little man rolled his eyes but nodded his agreement. "Well, I suppose I'd better go and see if I can help anyone downstairs," he said. "I know my shift doesn't start for a few hours yet, but I like to do all I can."

"You're a credit to that uniform, little Willy," Gerta cooed affectionately.

Bescheiden strode out of the kitchen, his face black as a thundercloud. Scheusal permitted himself a private smile of triumph at having seen off his rival before approaching Gerta. "Have you heard anything from your beloved lately?" he ventured.

"No, not since Mitterfruhl," she admitted, "but I know he's

thinking of me. Engelbert's never far from my heart." Gerta reached inside her bulging blouse and pulled out a locket that had become wedged between her breasts. She snapped it open and showed the locket's interior to Scheusal. A surly cameo drawing glared out of it at the Black Cap, a single eyebrow stretching from one side of Engelbert's face to the other, like some elongated, hairy caterpillar. His ugly, thin lips curled with disdain at whomever had drawn his portrait. "I always say he's far more handsome than this picture suggests."

"He'd need to be," Scheusal muttered.

"What was that, Jacques?"

"Oh, nothing. Well, what chance I could get a taste of these famous dumplings of yours, hmm?" Kurt was angry with himself for humiliating Jan in front of Belladonna and the prisoners. It was no way to treat anyone under his leadership, let alone his best friend in Marienburg the man who'd helped him find some semblance of redemption after all that had happened. Kurt had always possessed a fiery temper and, all too often, it was his undoing. He let his anger get the better of his reason and others suffered as a consequence.

He fought with it, tried to keep the daemon down, but sometimes red mist overtook him and he would lash out at anything and anybody within range. It had happened with Oosterlee earlier, when the sensible choice would have been to turn the errand boy into a weapon against Henschmann. So what if Jan believed in superstition? People across this water-logged city believed in a dozen different cults, none of which rang true with Kurt. Manann, Shallya, Ranald, Sigmar, Morr, Ulric-to some people they were divine beings. For Kurt they were merely names, convenient epithets in times of stress. He might have believed in a god once, but that faith was crushed during the war against Chaos, torn apart by what had happened to him in Altdorf. Blame fate, blame the gods, blame whomever you liked -Kurt knew he was the person truly to blame for his old life. If he was to make a success of this new life, he had to find a new faith and a new strength of will. His temper could not be his ruler anymore.

The worst aspect of his argument with Jan was the inevitable fact that his sergeant had been right. Jan was always right. Perhaps not at the time, but hindsight tended to prove the wisdom of his words after the fact. That knowledge had fuelled Kurt's rage and now it added bitterness to his regret. He would apologise when Jan returned from patrol, and make sure it was a public apology. Like Jan had frequently told him, the true mark of a man's worth was his ability to admit mistakes and take responsibility for them. There was no shame in saying you were wrong, particularly if it repaired the best friendship Kurt had known since Sara-No, he wasn't going to think about Sara.

Those wounds were still too fresh, too painful.

It was almost a relief when Molly marched into the station from the abandoned temple next door. “Captain Schnell, isn’t it?” she asked, her voice stern and unforgiving, red curls massed round her face.

“Yes, Molly. What’s the matter now?”

“Everything was fine until one of your men staggered in, drunk as a member of the Stadsraad and got into a fight with one of my best girls. Astrid’s a good worker, never causes any trouble. But he’s locked himself in with her and won’t let anyone inside.” Molly’s chin wobbled slightly. “I’m worried about what he might do to poor Astrid. She wouldn’t hurt a fly, but him-”

“Who is it?” Kurt asked, removing his club from its leather sheath at his side.

“Says he’s commander of the graveyard shift, but wouldn’t give his name.”

“Holismus,” Belladonna said, biting her bottom lip. “I saw him stagger out earlier. Sorry, I meant to say something at the time but you were busy-”

“It doesn’t matter now,” Kurt interrupted. “You stay here. I’ll fetch Lothar back from whatever bottle he’s decided to pour himself into.” He turned to Molly. “Lead the way.”

She marched out of the station, rolling up the sleeves of her blouse and stomped into the converted temple. The previous day it had been all but a ruin, with broken pews and holes in the thatched roof. Kurt was surprised to see how much Molly and her girls had done since then, redecorating the interior and getting the roof repaired. She led Kurt through a richly furnished parlour, past a bead curtain that cut the temple in two and down a corridor, passing half a dozen doors on either side of the hallway. Molly stopped outside the last door on the left, gently tapping on the wood with her knuckles. “Astrid? You still in there?”

“Y-Yes,” a young woman replied, fear all too obvious in her trembling voice.

“Astrid? It’s Captain Schnell, from the station next door. Is Lothar Holismus in there with you?”

“He only told me his first name, but it was Lothar. I recognised him from yesterday.”

“Is he still in there with you?”

“Yes. He’s slumped in front of the door, and now I can’t get out. Keeps mumbling things I don’t understand. Just this and just that, keeps saying the same things, over and over.”

Kurt put a shoulder to the door and tried to push it open. The heavy wooden barrier did not move. “Astrid, can you reach past

Lothar and unlock the door?"

"I… I'm afraid."

"It's alright, Astrid," Molly called to her. "You'll be alright. Just do as the captain says."

"Jussst!" a voice shouted from the other side of the door. "Jussst! Jussst!"

"Holismus, is that you?" Kurt shouted.

"Jussst here…" the drunken Black Cap slurred.

"Holismus, can you unlock the door and let me in? I want to help you."

"Can't help. Jussst too late, for all of us. He's coming."

"Who's coming, Holismus? Who is it?"

"Jussst…"

Realisation hit Kurt like a wall of stone. "He's not saying just-he's saying Joost. Joost was his brother, Joost Holismus. He was watch captain on Three Penny Bridge, years ago."

Molly frowned. "But he drowned, didn't he?"

"That was the official story," Kurt said, recalling what the other captains had suggested in the commander's office the previous day. "Lothar, did you see your brother Joost?"

"Joost was here…"

"Here, in Molly's place?"

"At the station. Joost came to me, talked to me… Said we were all going to die…"

"I told you, he was drunk when he came in," Molly insisted.

"I don't doubt that, but Lothar hadn't touched a drop for days," Kurt said.

"Then he's drying out, getting the visions. I've witnessed people losing their grip on reality, seeing things when they're drying out. Best thing he could have done was climb back into the bottle," she decided.

"Not for me it isn't," Kurt replied, "and not for Lothar, either. If he did see his brother-actually see him, not just imagine Joost-the shock would have been enough to tip anyone over the edge."

"Captain," Lothar whispered from the other side of the door. "I did see him, I swear it. I thought he was just another nightmare, but Joost was real. He kept offering to lead me to salvation."

"Lothar, this is important. Where did you see him?"

"In the sleeping quarters, upstairs. He must have climbed up the side of the building. He was wet, as if he'd clambered out of the cut. I don't think Narbig or Raufbold saw him, they were asleep."

"Alright, I believe you," Kurt said. "Now I need you to believe me. Unless you open that door and release Astrid, you'll be charged, sentenced and probably spend the rest of your days on Rijker's. But

I'm willing to give you another chance. I need your help, Lothar. Together we can save your brother. But to do that, I need you sober. Can you do that for me, Lothar? Or should I give up on you, throw away the key?"

Molly was unimpressed by the captain's offer. "You're not going to arrest him? What about what he's done here? Frightening poor Astrid half to death, smashing furniture."

"By rights, I should close this place down, not to mention arresting you and your girls," Kurt replied. "But I've got more pressing problems and so does the rest of Suiddock, so I've decided to opt for a live and let live policy here." He turned back to the doorway. "Well, Lothar? What's it to be?"

A key turned in the lock and the door opened slowly inwards. Astrid burst from the room, throwing herself into Molly's arms. Kurt went into the bedchamber and removed Lothar. The shame-faced Black Cap reeked of ale, but he hadn't laid a finger on Astrid. "Get him out of here," Molly told Kurt. "And tell the rest of your men they're barred from my place until they can handle their drink."

"Fine by me," Kurt agreed, leading the lurching Lothar out of Molly's premises. The two men emerged into the late afternoon sunshine to find a grand coach parked on Three Penny Bridge, the crest of the City Watch emblazoned on its side. The presence of this mighty vehicle had brought foot traffic on the bridge close to a standstill, and a crowd was gathering to see what important visitor might possibly stop on this most notorious of spans. A number of furtive men in shabby military uniform lingered among the throng, trying not to meet anyone's eye-a sure sign of being deserters. Beside them were several halflings, casting an appreciative eye over the coach's ornately carved wheels. The driver jumped down from his seat and kicked at the halflings, driving them away before he held open the door and unfolded a set of steps from inside. A small, sour-faced figure emerged from the interior, sniffing the air unhappily. The well-dressed man climbed down to the cobbles and glared at Kurt with disdain.

"How charming! I arrive to inspect the newly reopened Watch Station and discover my newly promoted acting captain staggering out of what looks like a bordello next door, propping up one of his drunken recruits," the commander snapped. "I'm glad to see you're enjoying the perks of office, Captain Schnell. But perhaps you'd be better advised to concentrate on stopping the current crime wave!"

Kurt took a deep breath and bowed his head to the commander. "Forgive me, sir, but I was not expecting a visit from you so soon-"

"That much is obvious," the commander replied, holding a linen cloth over his nostrils to mask the smells of the streets. "Well, are you

going to invite me inside the station, or should I conduct my inspection from out here on the cobbles?"

"Please, come inside." Kurt leaned Lothar against the nearest wall and hurried towards the entrance. But before he could escort his superior inside, Holismus slid to the ground, already snoring loudly. Kurt hung his head, ashamed at having been caught unawares and so unprepared. He pushed open the door and held it back so the distinguished visitor could enter. "Welcome to Three Penny Bridge station, sir," Kurt said, directing his voice inside in the hope Belladonna might realise what was happening. "I trust you'll reserve final judgement on our progress here until you've seen everything we've achieved so far."

"I wouldn't count on that," the commander said. "I was displeased with your performance before I arrived, that's the reason for my visit. But it appears things here are far worse than I'd anticipated. Let us hope what I find tips the balance in your favour, Captain Schnell- otherwise this station could be closed before sundown, and your name will be forever stained with that shame. But, considering your past history in Altdorf, I'm sure you're used to that by now." He smiled and strutted into the station, leaving Kurt outside on the cobbles, fuming in front of a dozen bemused citizens. Jan found what was left of Mutig on a quay in Stoessel's northern ward, overlooking the Rijksweg. The Black Cap was missing both legs from below the knee and most of one arm. Leather belts had been fastened tautly near the end of each stump, stark evidence Mutig had been kept alive during the brutal amputations. This was torture, there could be little doubt of that. Somebody had taken to the watchman's body with a merciless enthusiasm, hacking away at Mutig's limbs while savouring his screams of agony.

If the dead man had been a criminal or a prisoner of war, Jan might have considered the treatment part of some obscene interrogation. But Mutig's record was clean, aside from a tendency to be cited for violent conduct soon after starting each new assignment. He had a reputation as a bruiser, but Jan had his own suspicions about that. Whatever the truth of that reputation, there could be little sane reason for the way Mutig had been abused. Whoever did this was sending a message. To underline the fact, they had crudely carved six words into the skin of Mutig's torso, leaving his tunic torn open so those finding the corpse could be in no doubt what the killing meant. Not subtle, but effective.

The sergeant moved closer, so he could read all the message at once: BLACK CAPS-GET OUT OF SUIDDOCK. Two further letters were etched into Mutig's flesh below the word Suiddock. Jan shook his head, unable to believe the sadist responsible for this atrocity had the

temerity to leave their signature on the victim's body: AC. The sergeant had little doubt who those initials stood for: Abram Cobbius. "Kurt was right," Jan whispered to himself. "The sooner we arrest this animal, the better for everyone." He knelt beside Mutig's body, reaching forward with one hand to gently shut the murdered man's staring eyes.

"I'm not dead yet," Mutig gasped in a hoarse voice.

"Taal's teeth!" Jan exclaimed, almost falling over backwards on to the quay, such was his shock. He recovered himself quickly and pulled a small gourd from his tunic pocket. The sergeant removed the lip and tipped a little Bretonnian brandy into Mutig's mouth. The Black Cap coughed twice, regurgitating most of the liquid, but swallowing enough to revive his spirits slightly. Jan removed his tunic and wedged it under Mutig's head, making him a fraction more comfortable. "Who did this to you?"

"Cobbius…" the watchman winced, his face contorting in pain. "Abram Cobbius…"

"Why?"

Mutig almost smiled. "I didn't recognise him… Tried to pick a fight…"

Jan nodded. "Beat the biggest thug you can find on your first day at a new station and nobody gives you any trouble after that, right?"

"How did you-?"

"Save your energy." The sergeant pressed a finger against his lips, silencing Mutig. "I've been using the same trick myself for years. But you shouldn't choose a sadistic madman as your target."

"Now he… tells me…" Mutig started coughing, turning his head sideways. Gouts of dark, sickly blood and bile escaped his lips, forming a pool on the quayside.

"Where did this happen?"

Mutig's eyes darted sideways to the tavern. "But he's gone now. Called away by his cousin."

"Lea-Jan Cobbius?"

Mutig nodded, the colour draining from his face. "Tell the captain… I'm sorry that I didn't…"

Jan leaned closer, trying to hear what the Black Cap was saying. But Mutig was dead.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Kurt took the commander around the station while Belladonna dealt with Lothar. The cells were empty for the moment, but they intrigued the commander. “You keep your prisoners in plain view?”

“That way anyone entering the station can see what happens to those who break the law,” Kurt replied. He led the commander up to the first floor, acting as guide for the tour. “We’ve three rooms that face south, towards the Bruynwarr, and three rooms at the front that overlook Three Penny Bridge. I’ve allocated the men one of the south-facing chambers as sleeping quarters, with the adjoining room set aside for ablutions. The graveyard shift is using the sleeping quarters at the moment, while the night shift are able to go to their own homes between tours of duty. The other room on the back of the building doubles as an interview room, and as the mess. At the front we have the kitchen, my office and female sleeping quarters.”

“Female quarters?” the commander sneered. “Not exactly protocol for a Watch Station, are they?”

“With respect, sir, you assigned Belladonna Speer to this station, so we had to find private quarters for her. Also, we acquired the services of another woman, Gerta Gestehen, who cooks for everyone.”

“Gestehen-I’ve heard that name before.”

Kurt sighed. “You probably know her as Gerta the Blurter. She came to the station, claiming a connection to the murdered elf, Arullen Silvermoon.”

The commander rolled his eyes. “That woman is infamous among Black Caps for her wild claims. Don’t tell me you’re fool enough to have swallowed one of her bizarre confessions?”

“Her story was a lie, as usual, but she was carrying evidence that links her to the victim. We believe she may have purchased it from the killer or from somebody who at least saw the body being dumped. Until we find that individual, we’re keeping Gerta here. It’s the safest place she can be.”

“You may believe that, but I doubt most right-minded citizens agree with you, Schnell.”

“Be that as it may-”

“Enough!” the commander snapped. “I’ve seen more than enough of this hole. Take me to your office, captain-we need to talk. More accurately, I need to talk and you need to listen.” Kurt led him into the threadbare office, the three chairs and makeshift desk failing to impress. “Sit down, Schnell. What I have to say won’t take long, that’s if you’re prepared to listen.”

“I’m always prepared to-”

“Don’t interrupt me!” the commander snarled. He slowly circled the room, as if marking his territory. “First of all, I believe you’re sorely in need of some lessons about tact and diplomacy. From what I’ve been told your sole successes since arriving here yesterday have been in making new enemies. In the space of a day you’ve turned more people against you, this station and all who serve inside it than most captains of the watch manage in their entire careers. Are you determined to get somebody killed?”

“No, sir, but I won’t-”

“I said don’t interrupt me!”

Kurt closed his mouth, willing himself to be quiet and take whatever abuse or advice the commander had come to deliver. Arguing with this man would do the station no good at all.

“That’s better,” the commander said after a lengthy pause. “As I was saying, you’ve created no shortage of enemies for yourself and, by extension, for the City Watch of all Marienburg. I’ve got members of the Stadsraad screaming for you to be removed, while half the merchants in the city have been signing a petition calling for your demotion. Frankly, I’m surprised you haven’t got the Stevedores and Teamsters Guild threatening to blockade Suiddock, it’s the only major force in this district that isn’t up in arms about you. Unless you learn to exercise some discretion, I doubt you’ll be alive come Geheimnistag.” He stopped by one the windows overlooking Three Penny Bridge. “Well? What’ve you to say for yourself?”

Kurt took a deep breath before speaking, giving himself time to choose his words carefully. “I imagine most, if not all, of those complaints originate from one source: Adalbert Henschmann. I visited him yesterday and put him on notice that the days when his League of Gentlemen Entrepreneurs could rob and extort the people of Suiddock are over. He didn’t take kindly to my words.”

“I’m not surprised. Did he threaten you?”

“Naturally. He also sent a fat fool called Oosterlee to bribe me. Neither was a success.”

The commander glared at Kurt. “Theodorus Oosterlee?”

“Yes, that’s the one. Bloated with his own self-importance. I took him down a peg or two.”

“Theodorus Oosterlee was one of my oldest friends,” the commander said, no trace of feeling in his voice, no hint of emotion in his impassive face and cold, dead eyes.

“You said he was-past tense. Oosterlee is dead?”

“The River Watch found his corpse an hour ago, floating in the cut beneath this station. I’m surprised you didn’t hear about it.”

Kurt shrugged. “I’ve yet to meet with my counterpart in the Suiddock River Watch.”

“Perhaps you would be better advised to start forming such alliances, instead of going out of your way to antagonise one of the most powerful men in this city, Schnell.” The commander turned back to the window, seemingly intent on watching passersby struggle to move around his transportation. A crippled soldier struggled past, a broken crutch supporting him where a left leg should have been, his tatty uniform hanging from an emaciated frame. “What have you discovered about the murder of this elf?”

“His name was Arullen Silvermoon.”

“Indeed. The House of Silvermoon is demanding answers and I have nothing to give them.”

Kurt shrugged. “Neither have I, sir. They have been told everything we know thus far.”

“Everything. Even about this person named by Gerta the Blurter?”

“Fingers Blake? No, not yet. We’re still trying to find him, but he seems to have vanished, and nobody’s talking about him, no matter how great a reward we offer.”

“Yes, your famous reward of a hundred golden guilders. Who is supplying this money?”

“We plan to seize assets from criminals and use these to fund informants.”

“And what about Black Caps in other districts? How are they supposed to keep their informants happy if you’re offering a small fortune to any scum that walks in off the street with gossip and rumour?”

“We will only pay the full amount to someone whose information leads to the elf’s killer.”

“That’s not what people are saying in other parts of the city, Schnell. You’ve created problems beyond imagining in all parts of Marienburg with your antics. I decide to pay you a visit, in the hope you might listen to reason, and instead I find you staggering out of a disorderly house with one of your men, a member of the watch who is plainly dead drunk in the middle of a Backertag. What am I to make of this?”

“Holismus saw his brother and-”

“Holismus? You’re saying he saw Joost Holismus? Impossible! That man is dead.”

“His brother says otherwise.”

“His brother is a drunk and drunks are not to be trusted, Schnell!”

Kurt bit his tongue, stopping himself from repeating the rumours he had heard about the commander’s brandy-sodden wife. That way lay instant dismissal, and that did nobody any good.

“Consider yourself and this station on notice,” the commander continued. “Either find a way to work with the local community-all of

the local community -or suffer the consequences."

Kurt stood, unable to contain his anger any longer. "Is that an order, sir?"

"Yes, it most certainly is."

"You are ordering me to kowtow to the likes of Henschmann and his cronies, allow them leave to rob and extort and threaten and murder as they see fit?"

"No, of course not, captain. I am telling you to do your job- without rocking the boat!" The commander strode past Kurt towards the office door, but the captain grabbed his arms and held him fast.

"Who sent you to warn me off?" Kurt demanded.

"How dare you? Unhand me at once, man!"

"Who's pulling your strings, sir? The Stadsraad or Henschmann himself?"

The commander's eye narrowed. "What did you say?"

Kurt let go of his arm. "You heard me."

"I won't forget this, Schnell. From now on, this station and its Black Caps are on their own. Don't expect any co-operation or assistance from other stations, other garrisons, other districts or other divisions of the Watch. If this place goes up in flames, we might come to watch you burn, but nothing more. Remember that when your temper leaves you and your men dancing with Morr himself!" The commander stalked from the office, cursing under his breath in language that would make a stevedore blush.

Kurt followed him out, not wanting anyone else to get in harm's way. He had burned enough of the station's bridges already, no need for the others to suffer further from the commander's wrath. The two men raced down the wooden steps to the ground floor, where Belladonna was waiting nervously with Faulheit. Both their faces were ashen, as if they had heard every word that had been spoken in Kurt's office. No, he soon realised, the cause was something else, something far more horrific.

Jan was standing in the entrance of the station, cradling Mutig's mutilated corpse in his arms. Raufbold slipped out of the station as soon as he heard the commander was on the premises. He had little fear of that old toad, but recognised the unexpected visitation as an opportunity. Raufbold knew the commander's presence would keep the rest of the Black Caps in the station busy and distracted, enabling him to satisfy a growing craving.

He hadn't had a proper chance to savour the sweet, burning taste of crimson shade in his lungs since being posted to Three Penny Bridge. Sure, he'd helped himself to the drugs he had confiscated from a minor offender, but that was low quality crimson shade. Now that old, familiar need was starting to make its presence felt. His hands

always gave the first sign, fingers trembling as if they were afraid. Next came the sweats, a thin sheen of nervous perspiration appearing across his skin until it soaked through his clothing. Left unanswered, the cravings would cause cramps in his stomach, blur his vision and shorten his already brief temper. Finally pain and delirium would overtake him, until he was ready to slaughter anyone who got in his way, butcher anybody who had the means to fund his habit. Raufbold had encountered a few crimson shade addicts suffering withdrawal symptoms during his time as a Black Cap-wretched creatures, beneath contempt or pity, the lowest of the low. He had no intention of going the same way.

Raufbold slunk across Three Penny Bridge to Riddra, knowing he would have little trouble finding a fresh supply of his personal daemon there. In a city where too many people survived on all manner of intoxicants, Riddra was the hub for suppliers and supplies. Opiates from Nippon were smuggled ashore here and the small island was also home to Marienburg's most infamous drug den, the Golden Lotus Dreaming House.

If you believed the rumours, many of the city's prominent and influential people visited the unremarkable building squatting near Three Penny Bridge to feed their filthy habits. Of course, they came after dark, and usually by boat, using a concealed entrance in a side alley. Raufbold knew better than to set foot inside the timber and stone building, even crossing the cobbled street to avoid being near it. An old wives tale said anyone who passed the front door of the Golden Lotus would become an addict, so powerful was the waft of black lotus fumes that seeped from the building.

In truth, Raufbold crossed the street simply because everyone else did. No respectable citizen walked by the Golden Lotus in daylight.

Besides, crimson shade was one of the few drugs not available within the Dreaming House. For that you had to find a dealer among those skulking along the narrow passages and alleyways that populated the shadows of Riddra. Crimson shade was extracted from leaves of the blood oak of Estalia, the foliage laboriously ground down to a paste by mortar and pestle, before being dried and desiccated. The results were sold as a fine powder that addicts rubbed into their gums, snorted through their nostrils or mixed with herbs and smoked in a pipe.

Raufbold had no time for the affectation of smoking a pipe these days. When he first tried crimson shade, he had enjoyed the ritual of filling and lighting a pipe. Now he would snatch the powder from whomever was supplying him and force the results into his gums, rubbing and rubbing until his teeth were coated in blood, waiting for that rush no other experience could match.

At least one good thing had come out of his new posting, Raufbold decided as he searched the streets of Riddra for a familiar face. He wouldn't have to cope with the long trek across Marienburg to get a fresh supply of his favourite vice. But he would have to be careful from whom he got supplies. They needed to be discreet.

The last thing Raufbold wanted was his dealer being brought into the station on charges and trying to escape a spell in Rijker's by giving up the name of their local Black Cap customer. Yes, discretion would be crucial, and for that he needed to find Marcel Roos. The Bretonnian drug dealer was fond of offering his customers a discount price for their crimson shade, if they agreed to read his twelve-volume novel about art, memory, time and sweet biscuits. Roos was convinced he would one day become a famous scribe, his magnum opus acclaimed throughout the Old World as a work of searing insight and poetry. The fact that few people could read and even fewer of them were likely to be looking for literature while feeding their addiction didn't seem to bother Roos. He always said history would recognise his genius. Raufbold had been a regular customer for more than a year and had often promised to buy a copy of Roos' masterpiece. One day he would have to make good on that promise.

Raufbold spotted Roos lingering in the shadows on the western most edge of Riddra, scribbling furiously in a leather-bound journal, the telltale bulge of a drug pouch visible in the folds of his cloak. "Marcel, there you are! I've been thinking about your novels and I've come to a decision."

"Yes?" the dealer asked, his face lighting up until he recognised Raufbold. "Oh. It's you."

"Is that any way to treat one of your most loyal customers?"

Roos went back to his writing. "I can't sell you anything today, Jorg."

"Why not? My guilders are as golden as the next man."

"Orders. No dealer in Suiddock is allowed to sell you a grain of crimson shade."

"Orders? Whose orders?"

Roos shrugged. "I don't know precisely, but the message was delivered by Henschmann's personal bodyguard Helga, so you figure it out. Your money's no good to us today-or tomorrow."

"Why?"

"You'll have to ask Helga that. Mine is not to reason why, mine is simply to do as I'm told or die."

Raufbold drew his dagger and rested the blade across Roos' journal, stopping him from writing. "I'll kill you before you write another word if you don't sell me what I need, Marcel. How's that sound?"

Roos swallowed hard but still shook his head. “I’m scared of you, Jorg, but I’m terrified of Henschmann. You know what he does to anyone who dares disobey him.”

Raufbold used the tip of his dagger to pull back the dealer’s cloak, revealing the bulging pouch. “What’s to stop me killing you and taking your bag of crimson shade?”

“It’s salt-try it if you don’t believe me. Helga took all my supplies, same with all the dealers in Suiddock. Killing me won’t do you any good, Jorg.”

The Black Cap sliced the pouch open and stuck a finger into the contents as they poured out. He rubbed the white crystals against his gums but they were salt, as Roos had warned. Increasingly frustrated, Raufbold lifted his dagger up so the point dug into the skin beneath the dealer’s jaw. “Why? Why cut off crimson shade supplies for the whole of Suiddock, just to deny me?”

“Helga said to give you a message. If you want your drug, come and get it. She’s waiting for you at the Marienburg Gentlemen’s Club.” Roos swallowed, a trickle of sweat running down his face.

“Why?” Raufbold demanded, his hands beginning to tremble uncontrollably. The craving was getting stronger by the moment, made worse by the knowledge his supply had been cut off. “Why?”

“I don’t know. Please, Jorg, I’ve told you all I know.”

“That’s not good enough,” the Black Cap snarled. Anger overtaking him, he rammed the dagger up into Roos’ head, until the hilt jammed against the jaw line. The dealer tried to cry out, but the blade had pierced his tongue.

Still not satisfied, Raufbold twisted the knife inside Roos’ head, feeling the tip grind against bone and sinew, until something brittle broke deep within the skull. The dealer’s body was twitching and thrashing, fingers dancing like madmen. Raufbold ripped his dagger free, a spray of blood and viscera coming away with the metal blade. Roos toppled over, falling face-first into the cobbles with a sickening thud, a crimson pool forming around his skull.

Realising what his craving had driven him to do, the Black Cap glanced about to see if anyone had witnessed his butchery, but everyone knew enough to mind their own business in this part of Suiddock. Raufbold wiped his dagger clean in Roos’ cloak, not noticing the blade’s tip had broken off. He stood up, his face bathed in sweat, his heart racing and breath coming in short, quick gasps. Roos must have been telling the truth, nobody would lie to a crimson shade addict holding a knife on them, but Raufbold wasn’t ready to walk into whatever trap was being laid for him. He had to find another dealer first, make sure he had no other choice. Raufbold looked at his quivering hands, scarcely able to focus on them. His withdrawal

symptoms were accelerating. He had to hurry. The commander had wasted no time to offer commiserations for the murder of Mutig. He pointed to the body triumphantly while sneering at Kurt. “See? This is what comes of your high-handed attitude, Captain Schnell. One of your recruits has been murdered and his blood is upon your hands! Well, I’m certain this poor soul’s sacrifice is merely the first of many here, all sacrificed at the altar of your ego. Remember what I said, captain-nobody else in the Watch will lift a finger to help you or your Black Caps. Nor can you expect any replacements or reinforcements. You’re on your own!” The commander strode from the station to his coach, taking care not to brush against Mutig’s corpse on the way out. Within moments the coach had rolled away, wooden wheels scraping across the cobbles on the bridge, until the sound was overtaken by the inevitable cries of gulls wheeling overhead.

Jan staggered into the station and laid Mutig’s remains on the end of the long bar. “It was Cobbius,” he murmured, “Abram Cobbius. Mutig told me not long before he died.”

Kurt sent Faulheit to fetch Otto, while Belladonna examined the tortured recruits’ clothes and torso. “This must have taken hours,” she observed, sadness in her voice. “They kept him alive through it all, making him watch as they took his legs and his arm. I’ve never seen such cruelty.”

“I have,” Kurt said, his thoughts drifting to another time and another place. “But the man who did this did it for his own pleasure, not as a sacrifice to a Chaos cult, not as any act of appeasement.”

“What did the commander mean?” Jan asked. “No reinforcements?”

“Henschmann has been calling in favours across the city, isolating us.”

“Maybe, but the commander wouldn’t simply cut us off without a good excuse.”

Kurt grimaced. “I accused him of being Henschmann’s lackey.”

The sergeant’s expression darkened. “You’ve signed our death warrants, Kurt-you realise that, don’t you?”

“Cobbius murdered Mutig you said so yourself!”

“I’m not talking about Mutig, Shallya take his soul! I’m talking about your self-destructive need to prove yourself, no matter what the cost. There’s more at stake here than your reputation, damn you!”

“Enough!” Belladonna stepped between the two old friends, before they resorted to settling their differences with fists instead of words. “Arguing is not going to bring Mutig back and it’s not going to change the commander’s mind. We have to make the best of what we’ve got, come what may.”

The two men glared at each other, still itching to vanquish their

anger with violence. It was Kurt who spoke first, blinking and looking away from his former mentor. “Jan, I’m sorry. I didn’t… I’m sorry.”

“You should be, captain. But Belladonna’s right-we should fight our enemies, not each other.”

“That’s better,” she said.

Kurt stared hard at Mutig’s blood-flecked features. “He’d still be alive if we’d arrested Cobbius.”

“True, but Mutig was the architect of his own demise,” Jan said, explaining how the Black Cap had chosen the wrong target to prove his courage. “Cobbius knows we’ll be looking for him, now. He’ll go to ground, no doubt protected by his cousin Lea-Jan. We’ll have to wait for our chance to take him.”

“So what do we do in the meantime?” Kurt asked.

“We do our jobs. If word spreads about Mutig’s murder and the way he was treated, it’ll be open season on Black Caps in Suiddock. We have to carry on as if everything’s normal, for now.”

Faulheit returned, bringing Otto with him. The priest approached Mutig’s body with reverence, but horror overtook him as he saw what had been done to the Black Cap. Otto shook his head, distraught. “Great Morr, save us,” he whispered, before clasping a hand over his mouth. The priest staggered and fell, his eyes rolling back into his head and his eyelids fluttering shut. Belladonna was first to him, kneeling at Otto’s side, pressing an ear against his chest to listen.

“He’s fainted, that’s all,” she said after a moment, rearranging the priest’s body into a more restful position on the wooden floor. “His kind possess a heightened sensitivity to the dead, they absorb some of the pain felt by the deceased in their final moments, offering comfort to the soul and guiding it onwards.” She glanced up at the corpse on the reception desk. “What happened to Mutig, the torments he was put through, they were too much for Otto. His body shut down as a defence against the pain.”

“I didn’t realise,” Kurt said.

“You weren’t to know,” Belladonna whispered, resting a hand of comfort on the captain’s shoulder. Below them, Otto stirred, his lips muttering silent incantations, his eyelids fluttering open again. “Don’t try to get up yet,” Belladonna warned. “You suffered a shock, seeing Mutig’s suffering.”

The priest nodded, licking his dry lips. “I hadn’t realised how bad it would be. Rarely does one of my kind encounter such savagery, such agonies in the dead.” He took a deep breath. “His ghost invaded my thoughts for a moment, overwhelming me.” Belladonna helped him to his feet and went with him to look at the corpse. Otto closed his eyes and reached out both hands above Mutig, breathing in and out slowly, his face a mask of concentration. “I can still hear the dying

echoes of his spirit, inside my mind. Mutig died in fear, but he did not die alone."

"I was with him," Jan said.

"Good. That was a comfort for him, at the last." The priest swayed and staggered back a step, but Belladonna was there to help him this time. He opened his eyes and looked directly at Kurt. "Mutig had something to tell you, Captain Schnell. A message for all your Black Caps."

"What message?"

"Beware the catacombs. Stone, tooth and claw wait there. Doom lingers below. Beware…" Otto shuddered, before his body relaxed once more. "Mutig is at peace now," Otto said. "His torments are over. But I feel yours are yet to come, captain."

"I fear you're right," Kurt conceded.

"What do you want done with Mutig's mortal remains?"

"By rights all Black Caps are entitled to a final resting place in the watch vaults beneath headquarters, but I doubt any of us will be welcome there at present. Can you keep him at your temple for a day or two, until the commander calms down?"

Otto nodded. "I'll require help to transport his body to the temple."

"Faulheit can assist you," Kurt said, turning to Belladonna before she could object. "I know you want to examine the body for evidence, but it will have to wait. You need to sleep first. That's an order."

Belladonna went upstairs, not bothering to disguise her unhappiness at being told what to do. While Faulheit helped Otto prepare the corpse for its final journey, Kurt took Jan to one side.

"The commander was right about one thing-we've made next to no progress discovering who murdered Arullen Silvermoon. I have my suspicions about the culprits, but no proof. We need to find this Fingers Blake, the thief who sold the brooch to Gerta. Any suggestions?"

"The night shift will be arriving soon, but it'll be busy enough coping with the usual drunken brawl and trouble outside taverns," Jan replied. "Have you got any of that bribe money left?"

"No."

"Pity. We could have used it to hire an old friend of mine, Sam Warble."

"The halfling detective?"

Jan nodded. "He can find people and get into places that are beyond us, but he's not cheap-thirty guilders a day, plus expenses. Of course, he does owe me a favour…"

Kurt couldn't help smiling. "Dare I ask why?"

"Let's just say it involved twenty-seven herring sausages, a

beginner's guide to taxidermy and a serving wench called Brunnhilde who accused Sam of murder. I persuaded her to think otherwise."

"You think Warble can find Blake for us?"

"Perhaps. At the least, he'll offer some useful advice."

"He could probably find Abram Cobbius as well, if we asked."

Jan shook his head. "Finding Cobbius is not the problem. He'll be sequestered in the guild headquarters. We have to wait until he gets bored, eludes those guarding him and comes out to play."

"I'll take your word for it," Kurt conceded. "If you're willing to cash in your favour with Warble, go ask him to find our missing thief. Every time I go upstairs Gerta demands to know what progress we're making. I can't keep her here indefinitely and I daren't let her back out on the streets. Besides, much more of her cooking and I'm liable to sink the next river taxi I get into."

"I know how you feel," Jan agreed, patting his bulging stomach. "I could be a while finding Warble. I'll try Sam's lodgings in the Winkelmarkt first. Failing that, he's liable to be eating in a halfling tavern near the elf quarter. You know how halflings love their food." Raufbold's stomach was cramping and he could hardly see to walk when he staggered into the Marienburg Gentlemen's Club. He'd accosted two more dealers after Roos, but got the same response from both of them-if he wanted crimson shade, he had to pay a visit to Helga. Now he stood on the stairs that led up to the club's first floor, the beefy blonde sneering down at him in disgust. Raufbold's tunic was soaked with sweat, his hands were shaking like a boatman trying to navigate his way out of a fishing net and his heart was pounding as if determined to burst from his chest at any moment. "P-Please," the Black Cap heard his weak, feeble voice pleading. "I need some shade… please…"

She unfolded her arms and held out a tiny leather pouch, dangling it in front of his face. Raufbold made a wild grab for the drugs, but Helga was too quick for him and he fell face-first into the wooden steps, splitting the skin across one cheek. "You disgust me," she sniffed, her nose in the air.

"Please," he begged, prising himself up off the steps. "I'll do anything you ask-anything!"

"Anything?"

"Yes!"

"Betray your fellow watchmen? Steal from them, lie to them?"

"Yes!"

"Murder them?"

Raufbold didn't hesitate for a moment. "Yes!" He'd have sold both his testicles for the bittersweet relief of crimson shade, even though he knew its effects would last a day or two at best. "I'll do anything!"

Helga smiled, an expression ill suited to her sour countenance. She opened the leather pouch and emptied its contents onto the steps in front of the Black Cap. Raufbold threw himself forward, pawing at the tiny crystals with his sticky hands, swiping the crimson shade into his mouth. When he could get no more with his fingers, he pushed his face against the staircase and licked the last specks up, along with all the dirt and dung tracked into the club by visitors in recent days. Helga climbed down the steps, clambering awkwardly over Raufbold. She knelt on one knee beside him, pressing her wide, flabby face close to his. “Now listen to me, you disgusting, vile little worm of a man. I own you now, you’re mine. Whatever happens in that station, you will send an hourly report back to me. A messenger will be lurking near the privy, waiting for word from you. They will also bring you fresh orders, when necessary. Obey without question and you’ll have all the crimson shade your sick, queasy, little heart desires. Deviate from my commandments and you’ll never find another person in the city willing to feed your cravings. Is that quite clear?” Raufbold nodded, all his troubles floating away from him. “Then get out and never sully this place with your presence again.” Scheusal, Bescheiden and Verletzung all appeared for their night shift on time and-to Kurt’s relief-sober. After his travails with Lothar and the murder of Mutig, the last thing this station needed was for another man to go missing or off the deep end. He briefed the trio about all that had happened and warned them not to patrol near the guild headquarters. “If you see Abram Cobbius on the street, don’t try to be a hero and tackle him single-handed. Keep a good watch on his movements and get a message back to here, telling us where you are and what you’re doing. Understand?”

Satisfied they had grasped his instructions, Kurt let Scheusal take charge of allocating assignments for the evening’s patrols. The Bretonnian gave a good account of himself, sending Bescheiden east to Luydenhoek and basing the scowling Verletzung on the more dangerous island of Riddra. Scheusal claimed the Stoessel patrol for himself, a sensible choice in the circumstances. He looked to his captain for approval and Kurt was happy to give him the nod. Jan had been right, as usual. Scheusal might not have much to say for himself, but he obviously listened and learned. His brawn hid a deceptively intuitive brain. I’m lucky to have him here, Kurt thought. I could do with half a dozen more like him.

Jan returned as the night shift was leaving, the sergeant telling the three men to be careful out there as they departed. Once inside, he sought out Kurt. “No luck with Warble, I’m afraid,” he reported.

“I thought he owed you a favour?”

“He did. He still does. Sam’s up to his neck in a smuggling case,

something involving a solid gold statue of a bird. But he did make a few suggestions of places we could look for our thief, and told me how we could recognise him in a crowd. Blake's got a hook nose, black curly hair and it seems Fingers is more than just a nickname." Kurt smiled, waiting patiently for the rest of the explanation. "Blake has six fingers on each hand. That sort of mutation would normally have the witch hunters all over him, but he hides the extra fingers with a special pair of gloves. Nobody has ever seen Blake without those gloves on, so people started speculating about what was wrong with his hands-hence the nickname, Fingers."

"So how does Warble know-"

The sergeant held up both hands and shook his head. "Trust me, you don't want to know the details. All Sam would tell me was Blake does remove his gloves in the privy. After that, I didn't ask."

"Fair enough. So, where are the favoured haunts of our twelve-fingered friend?"

"The Alderman's Alehouse on Paleisbuurt, the Goat and Stoat at Goudberg, and the Marienburg Gentlemen's Club on Riddra. I've already tried the first two, that's why I was so long getting back here."

"That leaves Henschmann's domain and I doubt I'm welcome inside anytime soon," Kurt sighed.

Jan tapped the side of his nose. "We don't need to go inside to see if Blake's coming and going."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Verletzung was cold and wet, and he didn't enjoy either sensation. A thick mist had rolled in from the sea not long after nightfall and now Suiddock was covered in fog, hanging like a grey shroud over the district, deadening the night. It had driven away the drunkards and fools Verletzung liked to prey upon during his patrols as a Black Cap. To his way of thinking, all life was simply a question of how successfully you were able to acquire power and use it. That philosophy had been thrashed into him as boy, growing up in the soul-destroying area known as Doodkanaal. Verletzung's father had spent every day of his adult life fishing corpses from the innumerable cuts and canals that splintered the ward's many islands.

Marienburg had paid young Helmut's father to keep the waterways unclogged by rotting, festering carcasses. In exchange for this most repugnant of tasks, professional scavengers could lay claim to whatever they found on or around the bodies of the dead.

One day Verletzung senior had discovered a halfling corpse with a hundred golden guilders sewn into the lining of its jerkin. The weight had kept the body beneath the water for more than a week, until eventually the bloated corpse had bobbed to the surface like a cork. Helmut's father had drunk himself silly with that money, the greatest find of his cruel, violent and vile existence. But he had bragged once too often about his good luck while supping upon fine Bretonnian brandy in a tavern full of cut-throats. When he woke many hours later in a gutter, minus his tunic and money pouch, the bitter man had gone home and taken his shame out on his family.

He beat the eight year-old Helmut for an hour before turning on the boy's mother. She died from her injuries, but Verletzung senior was not charged with her killing. When the Black Caps came to the door, he claimed to have lashed out at her in self-defence. A nod and a wink was all it took for the drunkard to escape justice.

Helmut waited ten years before seeking vengeance against his father, waited until the old man was no longer strong enough to defend himself. Helmet beat his father black and blue before drowning him in the canal, weighing the body down with one hundred golden guilders. "There, father," he whispered in the drowning man's ears as Verletzung senior sank beneath the surface of a Doodkanaal waterway. "There's your precious coins. I hope you enjoy them."

Afterwards, Helmut had waited at home for three days, expecting the knock at the door, waiting for the men in black caps to come and take him away for punishment. If there was any justice in this waterlogged city, he should be made to suffer for having committed a

cold-blooded, premeditated murder. But Helmut eventually came to the conclusion that there was no justice in Marienburg. You could get away with murder if you were clever enough or lucky enough, or rich enough to bribe the Black Caps. Nobody came to arrest him for his father's much deserved murder, nobody even enquired what had happened to Verletzung senior. A week later the dead man's bloated corpse duly appeared in the water by Doodkanaal and was stripped bare by the men who had taken his place as canal cleaners. Nobody cared and nobody commented upon the murder.

Helmut took this as a sign and applied to the City Watch, deciding he would mete out punishment and retribution whenever and wherever he saw fit. Those who held power over others, they were the ones who determined life and death. Morality, right and wrong-these had no meaning for Helmut Verletzung from the day he joined the Black Caps.

After suffering a childhood of beatings and bruises, he soon grew to enjoy making others suffer. He took what he wanted, just as his father had done. But there was one part of his father's life he had no wish to replicate: working in the waters around Marienburg. Growing up, the family's lodgings in Doodkanaal had always been damp. They lived in a basement beneath the level of the city's water table and dampness was always seeping through the floors and walls.

Mould crept across the ceiling like a black, insidious infection, seeking to clog the lungs of anyone unfortunate enough to live in the hovel. Helmut's father came home every night and sat with his wet feet up in front of the fire, so the single room dwelling stank of the sewerage that drained directly into the canals where he worked. Verletzung senior had coughed constantly, a wet, hacking cough that infuriated the boy. Whatever else happened in his life, Helmut had sworn he would never again endure such moisture-sodden misery.

Now here he was, cold and wet once more, patrolling the streets of Suiddock. All he had to illuminate his way and offer any warmth was the feeble light of a lantern suspended from a pole. Sweet Shallya, how he hated weather like this! These damp mists could hang over Marienburg for days if wind did not come to blow them away. No matter how dry you might be indoors, step outside and you would be soaked to the skin within fifty paces. Once you did get back into the warmth, that same dank smell that had haunted his childhood soon insinuated its way into your nostrils.

Within moments of catching that scent, he was transported back to those horror-filled nights and bleak boyhood days, when his drunken father tormented and tortured him and his mother. To be forced to relive those memories, even for a moment, was Verletzung's idea of purgatory. He would give anything to be warm and dry right

now.

In the distance he could hear a temple bell tolling and carefully counted the chimes as they were struck. When the last bell sounded, he couldn't be certain of the total-was that eleven or twelve? If it was the former, he still had another hour left out in this cold, damp misery. If it was midnight, he could return to the station and let the graveyard take his place on the cobbled streets. Verletzung made a fateful decision. He couldn't be sure if it had been twelve, but he didn't care anymore. He would make his way back to the station and let that be an end to it. If Sergeant Woxholt, Scheusal or that fool of a captain wanted to berate him for dereliction of duty, let them. But another hour out in this fog was more than he could bear.

Verletzung started back towards Three Penny Bridge, trying to pull the damp cloak closer round his shoulders. He would have happily extinguished his lantern considering what little use it was in this damned mist, but wasn't sure he could find his way back to the station without it. Besides, he had no wish to take a wrong turn or miss his step on the slippery cobbles and fall into a cut or canal. So he held the lantern ahead of him on its heavy, awkward pole.

Verletzung didn't see the furtive figures in the distance so much as hear them. They were running, their feet making a curious double noise-a padding sound akin to softened leather slapping on stone, and another sound, a kind of skittering or scraping. There must be at least a dozen of them, judging by the number of sounds Verletzung was hearing. He ran forward, the lantern swinging and swaying from its fixture on the pole as the Black Cap hurried onwards.

He never quite caught sight of them, not enough to be able to offer a description of what the figures looked like. But there was something disturbing about them, a sinister quality that made the hairs on the back of Verletzung's neck stand up and the flesh on his cold, damp arms rise up like goose pimples. At one point a face turned towards the Black Cap and he caught a glimpse of it: black, beady eyes, vicious teeth and something else, something that didn't seem human. But it was only a glimpse and Verletzung couldn't be sure of even those few details, thanks to this accursed mist. The figure turned away and then all of them were gone, vanished from sight and inaudible to their hunter's ears. Verletzung slowed and then stopped, suddenly uncertain of himself and his own senses. He waited, letting his eyes become accustomed to his surroundings once more, but all trace of the furtive figures was lost in the fog-bound night.

Verletzung spat out a curse, before cursing again after realising he had lost all track of his bearings. He knew he was still on Riddra, as he hadn't crossed Three Penny Bridge and that was the only dry method of departing the small island. He was debating whether to try

and retrace his footsteps, knowing the likely hopelessness of that task. Whomever he had been following, they knew these alleys and passageways far better than him. They had led him a merry chase into some obscure corner of Riddra before vanishing and now he was utterly lost. It was a relief when he heard heavy footfalls coming towards him, and the sound of a man cursing the fog. Belladonna woke at dawn the next morning, her slumber broken by the graveyard shift stumbling into their sleeping quarters after a long night patrolling the mean streets of Suiddock. She dressed quickly and made her way down to the ground floor of the station, startled to discover she had been asleep since the previous afternoon. A thick mist hung over Three Penny Bridge, not a gust of wind available to lift the fog that had rolled in overnight. Faulheit was a forlorn figure behind the reception desk, staring at the five drunks asleep in the holding cells. "Busy night?" Belladonna asked cheerfully.

Faulheit shook his head. "The mist came in not long before midnight. After that, nobody could see far enough to make any trouble. With any luck the fog might keep things quiet today."

"I wouldn't count on it. Any idea where the captain or the sergeant are?"

"No."

She spotted a note nailed to the wall behind Faulheit's head. "Didn't you read that note?"

"There's a note?" He looked round and noticed it for the first time, before shrugging disconsolately. "Wouldn't have mattered much if I'd noticed earlier, since I can't read that well."

"I thought all Black Caps were required to have at least rudimentary reading skills these days."

"Yeah, well," he scowled.

"Let me guess-you couldn't be bothered going to lessons."

"Reading is for priests and the rich," Faulheit muttered. "I don't need to read to do my job."

"Not if you think the job involves hiding in here, trying to avoid any trouble that might happen out on the street," Belladonna snapped. She walked past him and retrieved the note, reading it out loud for his benefit. "Keeping watch with Woxholt on MGC. Should be back before day shift begins-Captain Schnell."

"MGC?"

"The Marienburg Gentlemen's Club," Kurt replied as he marched in from outside, followed by a sheepish Jan. Both were soaked through and shivering, their arrival accompanied by the usual cries of gulls outside. "Twelve hours we spent in the shadows, watching that place. Might as well have been looking at the Bruynwarr for all the difference it made, we couldn't see a damn thing once the fog rolled

in!"

"How was I to know about the weather?" his sergeant protested.

"Fingers Blake could have been standing an arm's length in front of us and we wouldn't have spotted him." Kurt took off his cloak and threw it on the reception desk, a fine spray of water from the garment spattering Faulheit. "So, did anything happen while we were wasting our time on Riddra?"

Faulheit stood up straight, a glow of importance overtaking him. "Holismus from the graveyard shift had nothing to report when I relieved him, captain. Five men were arrested through the course of the night for disturbing the peace. They're all in the cells, sleeping off their hangovers."

"Good. When they wake up, fine them anything they have in their pockets up to a guilder each and kick them out. We're short staffed and can't afford to feed them. Anything else to report?"

"Verletzung never returned from his patrol at the end of the night shift."

"Why not?"

Faulheit shrugged and resuming his previous position, slumped over the reception desk.

"For the love of Shallya," Kurt raged. "Don't tell me he's deserted!"

Jan shook his head. "That doesn't sound like Verletzung. He's got a violent temper and a reputation for bullying anyone weaker than him, but he's no quitter." A wooden cart rumbled across Three Penny Bridge and stopped outside the station. Jan glanced at it through the open doors before continuing. "He could have gotten lost, pursuing a suspect last night. The fog was thickest on Riddra."

"You hardly need remind me of that," the captain scowled.

"Delivery for Three Penny Bridge Watch Station!" a voice called outside. Moments later somebody ran off, their footfalls rapidly fading into the deadening mist. Kurt glared at the cart stood outside the station, his expression curdling into a grim determination.

"If that's another load of swine, I'll swing for the person who sent them," he vowed, before marching out on to the bridge. Belladonna followed, curious to see what had been left there.

Jan was about to take off his damp cloak when a shout from Kurt summoned him to the cart. The sergeant ran outside, Jan skidding to a halt on the cobbles, the slippery surface nearly proving his undoing. He bumped into the cart and leaned on it for support, tipping over the side. That brought him face to face with Helmut Verletzung, whose lifeless eyes stared back accusingly at the sergeant. A bolt from a crossbow was buried in the dead man's throat, the end of the metallic shaft protruding from his Adam's apple. Someone had knotted a scrap

of paper to the bolt with string, Jan reached out a hand to touch Verletzung's skin. It was cold and damp, the only blood a dark crimson stain on his tunic. "He's been dead for hours."

"Damn it!" Kurt shouted into the mist. Jan handed him the note. Kurt unrolled the parchment and read out what it said: "TWO DOWN-EIGHT TO GO."

"A warning, or a promise?" Belladonna asked.

"A message," the captain decided. "Nothing more, nothing less."

"We can't leave Verletzung out here," Jan said.

"Don't you think I know that?" Kurt snarled through gritted teeth. He slammed a fist down on the edge of the cart repeatedly, rage and frustration turning his features an angry crimson. Eventually Kurt's fury passed and he tore his eyes away from the dead man's expression. "That's two men we've lost in as many days. With the commander refusing to give us any replacements, we'll have to make and mend the shifts as best we can. Holismus is still shaken from seeing his brother yesterday-assuming it was his brother he saw-so it's no use keeping him in charge of the graveyard shift. With Mutig dead, the day shift is also short-"

"I can take over his patrols," Belladonna volunteered.

"You're sure?"

"No, but we need to maintain a presence on the streets."

"What about Gerta the Blurter?" Jan asked.

"What about her?"

"She's a great asset to the station, especially her cooking, but most of the time she's sitting upstairs with little to do. We could use her in reception, as cover when we're out of the station."

"I decided to keep her in the station for her own protection, remember?" Kurt pointed out.

"Protection from what? We're no closer to finding Fingers Blake or solving the murder of that elf. Meanwhile our men are being murdered on the streets," Jan said in a low, urgent voice. "I think we're in more danger than she is, captain."

"You may be right," Kurt conceded, letting his gaze wander back to Verletzung. "Alright, talk to Gerta, see if she'd be interested in coming on the payroll."

Belladonna laughed. "Assuming the commander ever reopens his money pouch for us."

"Hmm. That's my fault. I've never been a political animal. I prefer my enemies to be in front of me where I can see them, instead of having them pretend to be my friend while stabbing me in the back."

"It's amazing you've lasted this long in Marienburg," Jan commented.

Kurt nodded, his gaze still on Verletzung. "Belladonna, can you

get that bolt out of his neck?"

"Why? What do you plan to do with it?"

"I want you to take it to a wizard of the Golden Order. Terfel's short, heavy and has disgusting habits, but he's also got a keen eye for metals. He might be able to tell us who made that bolt, and possibly even who fired it. Just be careful of his wandering hands."

Belladonna nodded, a wry smile on her lips. "Don't worry. I encountered his kind before-and worse-when I was gatekeeper for the Watch Commander's office. I can cope with the likes of him." She clambered into the cart and set to work forcing the bolt the rest of the way through Verletzung's throat. It eventually came clear of the wound with a wet, slurping sound that chilled the marrow.

Jan shuddered at the noise. "What should we do with Helmut's body? He has no surviving family in the city, at least none that I know of."

"I'll take the corpse to Otto," Kurt said. "A priest of Morr can discover more from a dead body than many of us can hope to glean from the living. I want you to stay here and man the station. Get Faulheit out on patrol. He looks too comfortable indoors. Let's see how he likes it outside in the cold and damp."

Jan nodded, clearly appreciating his orders. "How do you know Terfel?" the sergeant asked quietly. "I thought he was Suiddock's best kept secret."

Kurt smiled. "He studied in Altdorf for a time, but decided to leave the city after being publicly flogged for trying to sell fake gold to local merchants. I don't think alchemy was his strongest subject."

"That much I already knew," Jan persisted. "I asked how you knew him?"

The captain was about to answer, but was interrupted by Belladonna jumping down from the cart, triumphantly holding out the crossbow bolt for them to see. "You're right, this doesn't look like any alloy I've encountered before. We need an expert in metals to identify it."

"Then Terfel's the man for the job. You'll find him at the far end of Luydenhoek, past the north bridge. He keeps a small forge there, just look for the cloud of black smoke it belches." Kurt peered at the sky. The sun was beginning to burn through the fog, offering hope for a brighter day. "With luck this mist will be gone by the time you get there." She nodded and hurried away. As the fog slowly lifted, Three Penny Bridge and the streets that fed on to it started coming to life, filling with merchants and peddlers, citizens and sailors. Soon the cobbles would be awash with people, all pushing and shoving to get where they wanted. The corpse of a murdered Black Cap deserved a better resting place. Jan went into the station to fetch a blanket with

which to cover Verletzung's body. Kurt stayed where he was, staring at his dead recruit, but they were not alone for long.

"Captain Schnell?" a haughty, patrician voice demanded.

Kurt looked up to see a witch hunter on the other side of the cart, a cloak pulled tightly round his body and a wide-brimmed hat casting dark shadows across a grim face. "That's my name, what's yours?"

The witch hunter strode round the cart to confront Kurt, the long cloak swirling around him. "I am Brother Nathaniel of the Temple Court. You will render all assistance unto me, or suffer the consequences."

The captain folded his arms, scowling at the newcomer. "Spare me the menacing threats and dark, brooding behaviour, Brother Nathaniel-we're not in the Empire here. What do you want with me?"

Nathaniel's face twisted with rage. "I ask the questions."

"But I'm under no obligation to answer them, until you show me your official licence from the Stadsraad to operate within the city of Marienburg." Kurt held out a hand. "You do have a licence, don't you?" The witch hunter produced a piece of folded vellum and slapped it down on the captain's palm. Kurt opened it and read the ornate text scratched across the paper, noting the official seal of both the Stadsraad and the Watch Commander's office. "Well, everything seems to be in order," he said, his voice dripping with disdain as he folded the licence and returned it to the glowering presence stood opposite him.

"Word has reached me of a Chaos-riddled heretic living on or near this bridge."

"Has it now?" Kurt stroked his chin. "Hmm-heretics, heretics. No, can't say I've seen any round here, and certainly not any riddled by Chaos, as you so colourfully put it."

"Do not bandy words with me, captain, or it shall go the worse with you!"

"Perhaps you could be more specific. Vague threats and black hints may be all your kind need as justification for intervention outside Marienburg, but in this city we rely on facts and truth, not hearsay."

"I see you are determined to obstruct my investigation," the witch hunter snarled. "Your attitude is being noted, Captain Schnell, and my brethren will hear of your insolent manner." When Kurt did not reply, his accuser looked around to see if anyone was listening before speaking again. "Joost Holismus."

"Used to be in charge of this station for the Black Caps. He drowned."

"That was the official story, as you well know. Heroic captain sacrifices himself to save Suiddock. Lies and propaganda, spread by

his superiors to prevent panic gripping this district."

"Trust me, there's a lot worse things within spitting distance of Three Penny Bridge than one Chaos-addled captain who goes for a swim and doesn't come back," Kurt snapped.

"Heresy!" Nathaniel hissed.

"Cold, hard facts," Kurt replied. "Now make your point, or go!"

"Very well," the witch hunter said, drawing himself up to his full height. "I know that Joost Holismus was seen by his brother yesterday. We have long suspected the previous captain's drowning was far too convenient. Now we have the proof it was a lie. All those who give succour to a heretic Chaos worshipper are ripe for my powers of inquisition. My brethren and I will be watching this place. If Joost Holismus returns, you are to notify us at once. If not, the consequences for you and your Black Caps will be ruinous. The station will be burnt to the ground and you will become my prisoner, to do with as I see fit."

Kurt nodded. "Yes, yes, I've heard it all before. Thank you for visiting. I'll be sure to get in touch if Joost pops in for a chat and tankard of ale. In the meantime, get off my bridge!"

Nathaniel took a step closer, his face a mask of rage and hatred. "You go too far, Schnell!"

"I've stared death in the face more times than I care to remember. I fought against the tyrannies you claim to battle during the war against Archaon's forces. I do not need some jumped up thug with a prayer book and bad breath telling me how to run my station, or trying to frighten me. Go pick on someone else."

"This isn't over," the witch hunter vowed, stalking away towards Stoessel.

"Oh get out!" Kurt shouted after him.

Jan had emerged from the station in time to catch the end of this unhappy exchange. "I see you're still doing your best to make friends and influence people," he commented wryly, before laying a dark grey blanket over Verletzung's body, shielding the corpse from the gaze of curious passers by. "Who was that?"

"Brother Nathaniel of the Temple Court," Kurt sighed.

"A witch hunter?"

"Uh-huh."

Jan rolled his eyes. "Is there anyone you haven't aggravated yet? Give me a list and I can invite them to the station. Perhaps you could insult them all at once, save you doing it one at a time."

"I've heard that sarcasm is the grumpy man's wit," Kurt replied.

"At least I've still got my wits about me," his sergeant said. "Are you set on making enemies with everyone and everything in this city?" Jan rested a hand on Kurt's shoulder. "I know you're angry

about losing another man, but venting your rage on a witch hunter? I taught you better than that."

"I couldn't help myself," the captain admitted. "I've seen too many good men and women made to suffer needlessly in the service of a witch hunter's obsessive quest."

"Takes one to know one."

Kurt couldn't help but laugh at that, but his smile soon faded. He scooped Verletzung's body out of the cart, making sure the blanket wrapped around the corpse to keep it from view. Kurt staggered under the dead weight, but found his footing again after adjusting his stance.

"Do you need help carrying that?" Jan asked.

"No, I'll manage. I owe Verletzung a proper burial, if nothing else." Kurt glanced at the station. "I'm not sure how long I'll be with Otto at the Temple of Morr. Best if you get out on patrol, show the locals we're here to stay. The two of us need to set an example for them-and for the rest of the station." The fog had vanished when Belladonna reached the eastern end of Luydenhoek, the sky revealed as a brilliant blue and light dancing on the waters that lapped the edge of the island. In the midst of all this azure glory, it was not hard to spot the black clouds belching from a chimney at the end of a deserted passageway. Belladonna followed the soot-laden fumes to their source: a squat building of disreputable appearance, from which a steady stream of curses and blasphemies were issuing yelled by a gruff voice.

She waited for a pause in the violent language before rapping her knuckles on the dense wooden door. More curses followed, coming closer to the entrance, accompanied by the stamp of heavy feet. The door was wrenched open to reveal a scowling man as wide as he was tall, his face livid with anger. He was not much taller than a halfling but was clearly a man, however short his physical stature. "What do you want?" he snarled as he emerged, clutching a steaming length of metal in a hairy fist.

"My watch captain sent me," Belladonna replied, trying to keep fear out of her voice.

The belligerent face softened at seeing her strikingly beautiful features. "Did he now?"

She produced the metal crossbow bolt. "He said there was only one man in all of Marienburg who'd be able to identify the alloy used to make this-a wizard called Terfel."

The stout figure moved closer, waggling his eyebrows suggestively. "Flattery will get most people anywhere, my dear. But with looks like yours, you needn't bother. I'm at your service."

"He also said you had several disgusting habits and I should beware your wandering hands."

Terfel did his best to look appalled at these allegations. “Indeed. And who is this wantonly cruel watch captain that has so grossly maligned my good name?”

Belladonna smiled. “Schnell. Captain Kurt Schnell.”

“Ahh!” The little man scratched the back of his balding head and sniffed. “Well, in that case you’d better come inside. What’s your name then, sweetheart?”

“Belladonna Speer,” she replied, ducking her head to enter the wizard’s domain. “And if you don’t remove your hand from inside my cloak, you’ll find a dagger stabbed through it any moment now.”

“Ooh, I like you, you’ve got fire in your belly.” Terfel enthused, hastily withdrawing his curious digits as he followed her inside the low-ceilinged workshop. “Why don’t you take a seat and let good old Terfel have a look at this bolt of yours, hmm?”

“I would, but I’m not sure there’s anywhere safe to sit,” she observed, coughing politely. The interior of Terfel’s abode best resembled a head-on collision between a library and a foundry. Books were stacked from floor to ceiling in half the available space, piles teetering perilously close to collapse, while sheaves of paper covered in a spidery scrawl and incomprehensible diagrams curled in what sunlight seeped through the soot-smeared windows. The rest of the building was given over to a smithy, complete with roaring fireplace, a massive chimney stabbing up through the ceiling and an endless array of metals. Solid ingots were stacked in one corner, while sacks of ore and sand spilled across the floor. Pipes, poles, and metalwork in all manner of shapes and sizes littered the floor. The occasional puff of black smoke escaped the chimney’s suction and wafted out across the room, making the air taste of fire and metal.

“Here, let me open a window or two,” her host said, hurrying across to the nearest one and tripping on a pile of leather-bound tomes. He cursed himself for the mess, but had soon created several apertures to the outside world, letting much needed fresh air into the sweltering environment. Satisfied with the results, he returned to Belladonna and emptied a chair laden with ancient grimoires on to the floor. Terfel pulled a grubby cloth from up his sleeve and swiped across the leather seat. “Try that for size.”

She lowered herself delicately on to the chair. Once seated, Belladonna was at eye level with Terfel. He folded his arms and smirked at her. “So, let’s have a look at this mysterious bolt of yours, hmm?”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Otto regarded the mortal remains of Helmut Verletzung with a dispassionate eye. “I don’t see what more I can tell you that isn’t obvious from looking at the body. He died from having an arrow or crossbow bolt fired through his neck. It severed the cord that connects the brain with the rest of the body, so Morr would have claimed him within moments. Your man was facing the person who killed him. If they used a bow and arrow, they were twenty paces from him at most-less if they used a crossbow.”

“How can you be so certain of that?” Kurt asked, wrapping his arms around himself to try and stay warm. It was cold as the grave in the temple’s side chapel, and it was all the captain could do to stop his teeth from chattering. “I mean, about the distance of firing?”

Otto pointed at the small puncture wound where the bolt had penetrated. “The crossbow shoots its bolts with greater speed than most bowmen, though not all. I’d say a crossbow was used on this man.” Kurt nodded a confirmation. “He died before midnight, judging by how cold he is and the stiffness of the body.” Otto rolled the body over slightly and pointed out dark purple stains mottling the skin. “He was lying on his back for several hours after being slain. The blood in a body settles to its lowest point in death.”

“Anything else?”

“No, I’m sorry.”

The captain frowned. “I thought you could make the dead speak to you?”

“Morr works through me, giving those unjustly taken from this life a voice-sometimes.” Otto closed his eyes and muttered a few words under his breath, but Verletzung’s body remained unmoved. “I’m sorry, but this man’s spirit is long gone. Perhaps it left him before he died.”

“I don’t understand,” Kurt admitted, frustration evident in his terseness.

“Some abandon their belief in life before life abandons them.”

“Must you priests always talk in riddles and parables?”

Otto shrugged. “It is our way, captain.” He walked around the slab on which the corpse was resting, until he stood over Verletzung’s feet. The priest set to work removing the dead man’s soft leather boots. “If your men continue to be slain with such alacrity, I shall have more of them here in my temple than you will have at-” Otto abruptly stopped talking, his eyes widening and nostrils flaring.

“What is it?”

The priest held up a hand for silence, all his energies focused on

the murder victim's boots. "You know that this man was killed in a sewer tunnel, don't you?"

"No," Kurt admitted. "We know nothing of where he died, except it was probably on Riddra."

"It was. Slain below the surface, but his body was laid out on the street. You could see the indentations of cobbles in the blood that pooled beneath his skin."

"Yes, but how do you know he died in a sewer? We could smell nothing like that on him."

Otto smiled, his thin lips pursing. "The mist settled into his clothes and on his skin, drenching them overnight, cleansing them." He held up the boots. "But the stitching of these boots is suffused with human waste, and another scent. Something sweet and sickly…" The priest pressed his face into the leather, inhaling deeply of the foul aromas hidden within the seams. "Drugs, opiates-black lotus, I believe."

"There's only one place on Riddra that deals in that," Kurt said, his eyes gleaming at this discovery. "The Golden Lotus Dreaming House."

"The way the opiate is mixed with the waft of human waste…" Otto mused out loud. "I believe he was walking in the sewers beneath the Golden Lotus or close by when he was killed. The killers put his body back up on the surface, hoping to hide this fact." He smiled to himself. "They almost succeeded."

"But why take the trouble to dump him above ground?" Kurt wondered. "Why not simply leave his corpse in the sewer tunnel? We would scarcely be likely to find it down there, and tidal currents would have eventually taken the body out to sea. That would have been the perfect murder."

"I can tell you only what I observe and intuit. I cannot speak to the motives or thinking of those who committed murder, captain-that is your field of endeavour, not mine."

"True." Kurt ran a tired hand across the stubble on his chin, suddenly aware of how little sleep he'd had since arriving in Suiddock. He hadn't even had time to shave since his promotion. "You obviously have a better nose for clues than me. Would you come with me to Riddra, help me find the place where Verletzung was murdered? There could be evidence that leads us to his killers, help bring them to justice."

Otto formed his delicate fingers into a steeple. "I will help you in this, captain, but one day you must help me when I have such a need-without question or hesitation."

"Of course."

The priest smiled benignly. "You do not know what I will ask of

you when the time comes."

"That does not matter," Kurt insisted. "I never break a promise, no matter what it may cost me."

"I have heard that about you from others." Otto put the boots down beside the dead man's feet. "Very well. I must secure the temple before we can depart. In other parts of Marienburg, the acolytes of Morr can leave their doors unlocked, safe in the knowledge few would disturb the sanctity of the temple. But this is Suiddock and I have learned from bitter experience that such circumstances do not always apply here."

"Don't I know it," Kurt agreed, taking a last look at his murdered watchman before leaving. Terfel was warming the metal bolt in his fire while letting his eyes wander over Belladonna's shapely figure. Even in a less than flattering Black Cap uniform, she was clearly a beautiful young woman. The wizard wondered how she came to such a job. But there was a determined set to her jaw and a piercing look in her warm eyes that suggested direct questions would not get the answers Terfel wanted. He decided to try a more scenic route to the truth. "So, how well do you know Captain Schnell?" he asked while working the bellows.

"I met him first a few days ago, when he was given the station on Three Penny Bridge."

"And what do you make of him?"

Belladonna frowned, the expression creating tiny creases between her eyebrows. "He seems brave and resolute, certain of his own judgement. I imagine he would be brave in battle and loyal to the death. But his temper-that could be his undoing one day." She paused for thought. "Yes, that's my impression."

Terfel nodded, not volunteering his own opinions of the captain. "I knew him in Altdorf."

"Indeed?"

"My services were engaged by his father for a time, work involving precious metals and the like."

"I've never meet General Erwin Schnell, but I've heard he was a great warrior."

"Yes, they could have done with Old Ironbeard during the war against Chaos," the wizard said, turning the bolt over in the fire, letting the flames soften the metal shaft. "It was a shame what happened to Kurt and his brother on the battlefield. I don't think their father ever recovered from the shock."

Belladonna got up from her seat. "Is the bolt ready for examination yet?"

"Nearly," Terfel said, keeping his voice casual but carefully watching her face. "Of course, Kurt's behaviour shouldn't have come

as such a surprise-especially after that incident with his wife, Sara. I never heard all the details, but I know Old Ironbeard disowned Kurt afterwards."

Belladonna did her best to ignore his comments. "You seem to have an ear for gossip and innuendo, Terfel. Are you just as skilful when it comes to matters of metallurgy?"

"I flirt with gossip and women," he confessed, "but metals are my first love." The wizard pulled the bolt out of the flames and held it up to study the glowing shaft, turned white by heat. Tiny black specks shimmered within the metal, as if they were alive. "See that? See those particles moving inside the alloy?"

"Yes, yes I do," she said, a note of wonder in her voice.

"Extremely rare, they are-you'd be lucky to see them twice in your lifetime."

Belladonna continued to stare at the shaft, but it was already cooling and the surface became darker, making it impossible to see the specks anymore. "Why? What's so special about them?"

Terfel tossed the bolt back into his fire. "They tell me the alloy includes a rare kind of iron, created by smelting an expensive black sand imported from one particular beach in Araby. When used in arrowheads or crossbow bolts, this metal alloy enables the projectile to pierce any armour, any hide, almost any defence imaginable. It's like a glove around a fist, hiding the power of what it contains. Fire such an arrow or bolt at a target and it will slice through them like a hot knife through sausage fat."

"I've never heard of such an alloy before," Belladonna said.

"That's why Captain Schnell sent you. My knowledge of metals is almost without equal."

"Who imports this black sand into Marienburg?"

The wizard looked rather sheepish at this question. "Yes, I was afraid you'd ask me that. Only two people in the city maintain a regular supply of it- myself and Adalbert Henschmann."

"An intriguing juxtaposition of personalities."

"Well, you see, it's not strictly legal to remove black sand from that particular part of Araby. The beach is owned by a murderous warlord and he doesn't take kindly to having it depleted."

"And how often do you take possession of a shipment?"

Terfel shook his head in dismay. "You misunderstand me. I can only afford to buy a small bag a year. If it were flour in the bag, instead of sand, you wouldn't have enough to bake a loaf. I've run out at the moment, to be honest. I was due to get a fresh batch last week, but some cloth-brained fool among the stevedores left me a hundredweight of it by mistake. I thought it was my lucky day, until I got a visitation from a surly woman with muscles the size of my head.

She suggested I leave the sand next to the entrance of an underground tunnel, over on Riddra. I had to hump it all the way over there, under cover of darkness. You think Henschmann could at least have sent one of his thugs to do the heavy lifting for me, but no."

Belladonna listened intently to his words, pausing before asking another question. "This underground tunnel-where did it lead to?"

"Search me," the wizard shrugged. "Word is old Casanova uses the network of tunnels running through the catacombs and sewers of Suiddock for transporting contraband unseen around the district. You'd hardly think he needed to bother, he runs half the city as it is, but Henschmann likes to keep his hands clean. Strange thing is, his men haven't been using the tunnels so much lately. I've seen them, skulking about with their carts and coaches, even using water taxis."

"Could you show me where the entrance to this tunnel was?"

"You must be joking! I'm not sticking my neck out for you love-least, not unless you're willing to make it worth my while…" Terfel quickly became aware the point of a dagger was digging into his neck below the jaw line, threatening to pierce the skin.

"I warned you what would happen if those grubby little fingers of yours found their way inside my cloak, didn't I?" Belladonna asked in a sweet voice.

"So you did," he said, removing his hands. "My mistake."

"Repeat the error and you won't have hands at all."

"Point taken," the wizard agreed, swallowing hard as she removed her blade from his throat. "How's about I draw you a map of where I left the black sand. That way you get what you want and I don't get my neck opened up by you or one of Henschmann's more murderous bullies, yes?" Kurt and Otto had paused at the station, where the captain armed himself with a short sword from the cache of arms left behind by the building's previous occupants. Otto declined the offer of a weapon, preferring to retain his wooden staff. "I'm a priest, not a pugilist," he said. Kurt left a message with Gerta about where he and Otto were going, in case they did not return in good time. The two men set off from Three Penny Bridge but had hardly set foot on Riddra before they discovered Faulheit skulking nearby, trying to avoid trouble. Kurt was about to send his lazy recruit back to the station, until a better idea occurred. "How do you feel about sewers?" the captain asked, sliding an arm round Faulheit's shoulders.

"Well, I think they're full of-"

"I mean, how do you feel about helping us investigate the sewers?" Kurt interjected quickly.

Faulheit looked at the impassive priest of Morr for help but got nothing back. Perhaps realising he had no choice in the matter, the Black Cap sighed with weary resignation. "Which sewer am I going

down?"

"The one beside the Golden Lotus Dreaming House."

"Charming!"

"Don't worry," Kurt said by way of reassurance. "We're coming with you." The three men strode through the teeming streets of Riddra, their presence earning curious looks and dark whispers from the citizens there. Black Caps were a rare sight on the island, let alone two of them together, but to see them walking with a priest of Morr for company, that could only mean death for somebody and soon. The captain had little doubt word would have already spread about Verletzung's murder and the threat delivered with his corpse-gossip flew faster than any seagull across Marienburg. It lightened his mood a little to see the reaction of ordinary people to their passing. Kurt felt he had not been a strong enough presence outside the station walls thus far, but it was not easy when he had so few men at his disposal.

Within minutes they were outside the Golden Lotus, the sickly sweet scent of its vices seeping out of the three-storey timber and stone building. Kurt knew what happened inside, but this was the first time he had seen the notorious drug den in daylight. It had a cruel, sickening slant to the timbers, as if the structure was close to collapse. The dreaming house was run down and dilapidated, its exterior offering little evidence of the fortune spent inside by some of the city's most powerful people. The gold lotus symbol painted on the front door was all that revealed what happened within, that and the stench of suffering drifting out from the building. I will come back here one day and tear this place apart, Kurt silently vowed to himself-but not today. That would have to wait while more urgent calls demanded his time and energy.

"The sewer entrance-where is it?" he asked.

Otto sniffed the air, somehow distinguishing the required scent from among so many others-sausages being grilled on a stall nearby, the smell of sea salt, the wretched aromas of the drug den, the waft of drying laundry from a nearby washing line, suspended between two first floor windows to catch the sun. "Around this corner," he announced. "Close to where Riddra stops and the Rijksweg begins."

Kurt followed the priest round the corner, making sure Faulheit was not far behind. It was the captain who saw the sewer entrance in the shadow of the Golden Lotus, the lid already removed and slid to one side on the cobbles. "Somebody's been down there recently," he said.

"They may still be down there," Otto added.

"You go down and see, captain," Faulheit suggested. "I'll stay here and guard your escape."

"If there is someone waiting for us in the sewer, I'll need you

beside me," Kurt said, clapping a hand on his recruit's shoulder. "In fact, why don't you go down first, show me how it's done?"

"I could, but you are the senior Black Cap here, so-"

"That's an order, Faulheit. Down you go."

Grumbling under his breath, Faulheit waddled over to the circular hole in the cobbled passageway and lowered himself through it, having to force his wide hips down through the opening. After a few moments there was a heavy splash and a cry of anguish, followed by silence.

"Faulheit? How is it down there?"

"If I'd known where I was going today, I'd have brought a clothes peg for my nose!" an unhappy voice shouted up from the sewer. "Can't see anyone else down here, but then I can't see much at all."

Kurt clambered down the metal ladder fixed beneath the circular hole. It stopped shy of the murky, fetid liquid that swirled along the bottom of the tunnel, but he could see from how high the waters reached on Faulheit's boots that the remaining distance wasn't far. He let himself drop into the water, almost losing his footing on the slippery bricks that lined the tunnel. Kurt didn't like to think what was making his boots slither around on the tunnel floor, but his imagination didn't require much prompting. As Faulheit had said, the stench inside the sewer was all but unbearable, rancid bodily waste from thousands of people oozing back and forth around their ankles, nudged by the movements of the tide. Kurt wrapped an arm round his face, burying both nose and mouth in his elbow to stifle the worst of the smell. He drew his short sword with the other hand and looked round the circular tunnel while Otto descended the ladder. The priest landed in the water with the grace of a cat, his wooden staff acting as an extra point of balance in the treacherous tunnel. Like the others, Otto's face soured at the odours assaulting his senses.

"And I thought the stench of death could be strong," he commented dryly.

"Let's not stay down here any longer than we have to," Kurt said to his companions.

"Do you see me arguing?" Faulheit asked, looking about himself. Light was spilling into the tunnel from the opening above, but a faint green glow was also radiating from the walls to illuminate the sewer, casting a queasy pallor across the trio. "How come we can see down here? It should be close to pitch dark."

Otto studied the walls with interest. "Some kind of natural phosphorescence, I suspect."

"Good. I wouldn't want to strike a match down here," Kurt observed. "The gas being produced by all this sewage smells as if one spark could set it alight. Be careful what you do down here. Got that?"

The other two nodded. “Good. Faulheit, you stay here. If you see anyone or anything suspicious, yell for help.”

“I can do that,” the watchman agreed.

“Otto, you’ll come with me?” Kurt did not want to assume he could order Otto about as if he were another Black Cap, but the priest nodded agreement without hesitation. “Good. Let’s go.”

The pair waded forwards, heading inland, away from the Rijksweg. Otto was using his staff for support while Kurt struggled to maintain his balance. The last thing he wanted to do down here was slip and fall, as that would douse him in liquid excrement. He shuddered at the thought and pressed on, the priest close behind. Noises from the street above faded the further they got from the opening, with the tunnel curving round to the left. Ahead was a divide, the sewer splitting into two tunnels that stood at right angles from each other. Kurt paused when they reached the junction, waiting for Otto to catch up. “You have any preference which of these we try first?”

The priest did not answer immediately, his head cocked to one side.

“What is it?”

“Listen,” Otto whispered.

Kurt did as he was told and soon heard it too: the splashing of someone coming towards them from the left tunnel. He motioned for Otto to stand one side of the entrance while Kurt took position on the other, ready to accost whatever was approaching them. The splashing sounds grew louder and nearer, until they were almost upon the waiting pair, before suddenly stopping.

“Hello?” a nervous voice asked. “Is anybody else down here?”

“Belladonna?” Kurt gasped in surprise. “Is that you?”

The female Black Cap emerged from the left tunnel, clutching a dagger in one hand and a loaded crossbow in the other. “What are you two doing down here?” she asked, staring in wonder at them.

“Looking for Verletezung’s killer. You too?”

She nodded. “No luck finding the person who fired this crossbow at Helmut, but I do know the murderer’s identity: Didier Deschamp. Probably of Bretonnian parentage, judging by his name.”

Otto snorted derisively. “Impossible! How can you know such a thing, unless you indulge in witchcraft or other blasphemous practices?”

“No witchcraft necessary, just simple powers of observation, that’s all.” Belladonna turned the crossbow over to show the name “Didier Deschamp” burnt into the wooden stock of the weapon.

“Ahh,” the priest said, for once looking rather abashed. “I see.”

“No need to apologise,” she grinned.

"Where did you find it?" Kurt asked.

Belladonna jerked a thumb over her shoulder. "About twenty paces back that way, in a junction chamber. Terfel made a link between the crossbow bolt and these tunnels. Apparently Henschmann's thugs use them to shift their worst contraband-you know the sort of thing, mummy dust, crimson shade, the occasional orc corpse in ice. So I came down here, hoping to-" Her words were cut short by the sound of someone running towards them. Within moments Faulheit appeared round the corner, the overweight watchman staggering in the faeces-laden waters, his features stricken with terror. He stumbled and fell face-first into the vile soup, but scrambled back to his feet and kept coming.

"What is it? What's wrong?" Kurt hissed as Faulheit got closer.

"Half a dozen men, coming this way!"

"Why didn't you challenge them? They shouldn't be down here."

"I don't like to argue when I'm outnumbered. Besides, they were armed for war, not surrender!"

"Did they see you?"

"I don't think so," Faulheit panted. "They were busy looking for something."

Otto regarded the crossbow in Belladonna's hands. "Perhaps Deschamp is coming back for his murder weapon? He could have dropped it down here in the dark last night, after killing your colleague."

Kurt peered past Faulheit, trying to see if anyone had rounded the corner yet. They hadn't, but multiple shadows were visible on the curving tunnel wall, suggesting the intruders were not far away. "Fall back. We need somewhere better to make a stand if we have to."

The fearful watchman stared at his captain. "You want us to go further into the sewers?"

"We don't have a choice. We can't defend this junction effectively if they outnumber us. Better to retreat to a point where we have a chance of survival if this turns to combat. Now move!"

"Which tunnel?" Belladonna asked.

"The direction you just came from-is there a better place to make a stand along there?"

She thought for a moment. "The section where I found the crossbow could do. It opens out into a square junction, with three more tunnels running away from that. Plus there's a raised section on either side of the tunnel. That would give two of us a height advantage, if needs be."

"Sounds good," Kurt agreed. "Lead the way!" Didier Deschamp was beginning to regret this fool's errand in the sewers. He had been startled to find a Black Cap stalking him through the tunnels the

previous night, and panicked. The murder had been a reflex act, nothing more, nothing less. Given the choice, he'd have left the body down there and hoped it got washed out to sea with the high tides that accompanied the autumn equinox at Mittherbst. But his boss had laid down strict orders about operations within the tunnels and leaving corpses lying around in the sewers was not permitted.

So Didier had been obliged to drag the dead Black Cap for what felt like forever until he found an opening through which he could get it up and out of the sewers. Only after laying the corpse out on the cobbles had Didier realised his crossbow was missing. By that point it was too late to go back for the weapon. Rising tides would make the tunnels all but impassable. Instead he suffered an hour of drunken bellowing and berating from his employer, followed by the unhappy task of retrieving the body and delivering it to the station on Three Penny Bridge, with a suitably threatening note added to the corpse.

Didier's big mistake? Making mention of the misplaced weapon in front of his still aggrieved boss.

That stupidity had earned a thrashing, and now here he was in the bloody sewers once more, traipsing around with five surly thugs for company, searching for the damned crossbow. Didier had been awake since dawn the previous day, he hadn't eaten in all that time and now he was ankle-deep in human sewage, uncertain if he was even in the right tunnel. It didn't help that he had a growing suspicion the five muscle bound thugs had orders to kill him once the weapon was found. Didier was busy thinking of ways to escape his minders when one of the thugs, a man-mountain called Fokkes, noticed the opening at the top of a ladder that led up to the streets of Riddra. "Somebody else had been down here," Fokkes observed, drawing a viciously curved and notched knife from a sheath at his side. "They might still be down here, waiting for us."

"What? You think this is an ambush?" Didier asked and once more wished he could learn to think before opening his mouth, instead of after. Such a talent would undoubtedly enhance his prospects of surviving this journey. "But how would they even know we were coming here now?"

Fokkes mulled that over for a few moments before shrugging. "They could still be down here."

"Then let's be on our guard," Didier replied, grateful for the chance to draw his dagger. "Besides, I don't think we're far from where I dropped the crossbow. I recognise this section of the sewers. We go round the corner and then take the left tunnel at the next junction." He pushed his way past the others and stomped forwards, hoping his lack of subtlety would warn off anyone else in the sewer. The last thing he wanted was a pitched battle in an underground

chamber lined with human excrement. Taal's teeth, I can read and write, Didier thought-I deserve better than to end my days somewhere like this. The others kept close behind him, a fact that did little to soothe his nerves. The troupe rounded the bend in the tunnel and soon reached the point where the sewer channel divided. Didier was all set to stomp into the left tunnel, but Fokkes held him back.

"Did you hear that?" the big man hissed.

"Hear what?"

"Sounded like somebody drawing a sword from its sheath!"

Didier stopped and listened, but could hear nothing beyond the dripping of brown liquid. "Come on. The sooner we find this crossbow, the sooner we get out of here, yes?"

Fokkes shook his head. "I go first, then the others and then you. If there are enemies down here, I want somebody behind me who won't drop their weapon at the first sign of trouble."

"Fine. Have it your own way. Lead on, show us how it's done!" Didier huffed.

The big, burly man scowled. "If you won't do this for your own sake, do it for our sake, yes?"

"By all means. Let's do it your way, for Fokkes' sake!"

Fokkes took a deep breath, his nostrils flaring, before turning away and marching into the left tunnel. The other four thugs followed him, daggers and crossbows at the ready. Didier dawdled after them, not wanting to get too close in case trouble did erupt. Run away and live to fight another day, that was his philosophy and it had kept him alive longer than most criminals in Marienburg. Kurt had stationed himself on the raised brickwork to the left of the outlet where the tunnel entered the square junction, while Otto was on the raised area to the right, wooden staff at the ready Belladonna crouched below Kurt in a dark corner of the sewer intersection, Deschamp's crossbow in hand. Faulheit waited in the corner beneath Otto, armed with a dagger.

The approaching men were making much less noise than before as they neared the junction, but were still clearly audible to the waiting quartet. Kurt met the gaze of the other three, nodding to them as he gripped his short sword tightly. When the first man emerged from the tunnel, Kurt held up a fist, signalling for the others to hold back as long as they could before engaging the enemy.

A second man emerged, as big and intimidating as the first, followed by a third. All their attention was focused forwards, not noticing the quartet hiding on either side of them. A fourth emerged from the tunnel and he glanced about himself, his eyes going straight to Otto's face. The priest pressed a finger to his lips, motioning the new arrival to silence. The man frowned, perplexed by this.

“This is it,” a snide voice announced from inside the tunnel. “I recognise that junction you’re standing in. That’s where I slaughtered that blundering fool of a Black Cap.”

“For the love of Shallya, shut up!” the first man out of the tunnel hissed.

It had occurred to Kurt as he stood watching the men emerge he had no reason to believe they were dangerous. He and the others simply assumed those approaching were linked to Verletzung’s murder, as a result of Belladonna’s discovery of the crossbow. What if he had rushed to judgement and was about to attack a party of innocents that had come into the sewers for some unknown reason? But the words spoken by the snide voice removed any lingering doubts the captain had.

One of these bastards had murdered Verletzung in here and now they were coming back to remove the evidence of their crime. They deserved no mercy and he didn’t intend to offer them any. “Now!” he yelled at the others, leaping from the brickwork while slicing his sword through the air. It took the head from the fourth man’s shoulders with that first swing, while another flash of the blade removed the fifth man’s nose as he emerged from the tunnel, still uncertain what was happening. He crumpled into the sewage on top of his decapitated colleague’s, hands clutching at a wound that spurted blood in a crimson aerosol.

Belladonna fired Deschamp’s crossbow the moment Kurt gave the command to attack. The bolt buried itself in the first man’s side, but this merely alerted him to her presence. He turned and threw himself at her, crushing Belladonna’s body into the corner, smashing the air from her lungs. Her knees gave way and white dots danced before her eyes, before darkness threatened to take her. Belladonna’s hands fumbled for a fresh bolt to reload the weapon, but the fetid liquid splashing around made her fingers slick and clumsy.

Faulheit’s hands were shaking so much, he dropped his dagger before it could see any use. The second man of the six whirled round and laughed at him, before advancing with murder in his eyes. A mighty fist swung back, ready to pummel Faulheit’s terrified face into the tunnel wall. But the fearful Black Cap lost his footing and fell sideways into the sewage. His attacker had already lashed out and couldn’t divert his momentum, punching the wall with such force it broke every bone in his hand. His scream of pain echoed round the small, square chamber, so loud it threatened to puncture the eardrums of everyone else. Sensing a chance to escape, Faulheit crawled away into the nearest tunnel he could find, plunging deeper into the catacombs beneath Riddra. Darkness enveloped him as the surface beneath his hands and knees abruptly twisted downwards. Faulheit

slid away, screaming for help.

Otto stayed where he was atop the brickwork, using the height advantage it gave him and the length of his wooden staff to deal with the enemy from a safe distance. He smacked his staff soundly against the third man's head several times, the skull cracking like a rotten egg. The priest put the second man out of his misery with a similar succession of forcible blows. Lastly, he drove the end of his staff down on the neck of the man without a nose, keeping the bloody face below the surface of the sewage until the unfortunate soul stopped struggling. Only then did Otto lower himself down on to the tunnel floor. He was moving to assist Kurt, until his attention was taken by a whimper of fear from nearby.

Kurt had seen Belladonna crumple in the corner and responded by driving his sword into her attacker's back. The blade buried itself to the hilt but still the man-mountain kept lashing out at Belladonna. Kurt twisted the sword inside the wound and that got the man's attention. He swung round and swatted Kurt aside, as a fishmonger would swat flies from the day's catch. The captain smashed into a brick wall and sank into sewage, gasping for breath. He watched in horror as the attacker turned back to Belladonna, ready to deliver the killing blow. "No!"

Her eyes met his for a moment and she smiled, before pulling the crossbow up out of the murky water and firing a fresh bolt directly between her attacker's eyes. The end of the metal shaft emerged from his head with a sickening splutch and he toppled over backwards, collapsing atop the bodies of his fallen colleagues. Belladonna got back on her feet and stumbled over to Kurt, helping him upright too. "What happened to Faulheit and Otto?" she asked.

"Faulheit fled when the fighting started," Kurt replied, "but I didn't see what happened to Otto."

"I heard a noise," the priest replied as he emerged from a tunnel, dragging a bedraggled creature behind him, "and found this cowering in the shadows. Says his name is Deschamp."

"Didier Deschamp?" Kurt hissed.

"Depends who's asking," the small, sewage-soaked captive replied.

Belladonna handed the crossbow to her captain. Kurt held up the stock to reveal the name burned into the wood. "The same man who left his crossbow here last night after killing one of my Black Caps?"

"It was self-defence," Didier suggested, trying to smile ingratiatingly at them.

"I believe your exact words were 'That's where I slaughtered that blundering fool of a Black Cap', if I heard you correctly a few minutes ago," Otto observed.

The captive winced. “I was… bragging. That’s it, I was bragging to these thugs.” He looked down at the pile of dead men slumped across the floor. “Honestly, I think they brought me down here to murder me.”

“Shame we interrupted them,” Belladonna replied.

“I can explain all of this,” Didier offered. “Honestly, I can.”

Kurt reclaimed his sword from the nearest body and held it under Didier’s chinless face, so the blade dug into the killer’s jaundiced skin. “Start talking, Deschamp-and I suggest you make it good.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jan marched to the station with two surly youths from Stoessel in his clutches, one clamped under each arm. They had been selling what was claimed to be an aphrodisiac in tiny clay bottles, saying it could turn the most flaccid of men into raging beasts of the bedroom. The pair were turning a healthy profit from housewives hungry for more action, until the sergeant intervened. When the gathered women protested, he made both youths drink several bottles of their merchandise. Unsurprisingly, neither was transformed into passion-crazed beasts by the apparent overdose. "What's in these?" Jan had asked loudly, making sure everybody watching the spectacle could hear.

"Beetroot juice," one of the sellers admitted in a whisper.

"Louder, so they can all hear you," the sergeant prompted, twisting the youth's ear violently.

"For the love of Shallya, it's beetroot juice! We're selling beetroot juice!"

A groan of disappointment went round the women, who shook their heads and wandered away, clucking to themselves about the youth of today and what a disgrace the boys were to their families. Jan had crushed all the bottles underfoot before marching the two culprits back to Three Penny Bridge. "I think your parents will have something to say about your little endeavour," he promised.

"I doubt it," one of the youths replied. "My mama swears that beetroot juice as an aphrodisiac."

"Be that as it may, I doubt any apothecary would approve of your methods. Besides, selling goods under false pretences is a serious crime in a merchant city," Jan said. But his determination to punish them faded when he saw what was happening on the bridge. Raufbold and Bescheiden were arguing with Scheusal in front of the station, while Narbig watched from the entrance. Holismus sat on the cobbles, gripping a bottle in trembling hands. Gerta stood next to him, a sack bulging with provisions by her feet and a stack of cooking pots beside it. "What in Manann's name is going on here?" the sergeant demanded.

"We're leaving!" Bescheiden shouted at him. "We're not staying in that building for another minute. Everybody said it was cursed and they were right!"

"Lower your voice," Jan warned, as he got closer.

"Why should I? We don't have to stay here and wait to be slaughtered like Verletzung and Mutig!"

By now the sergeant was within spitting distance of the weasel-

faced watchman. Jan let go of his two captives and they fled. Narbig moved to stop them, but Jan shook his head. “Don’t bother,” the sergeant snapped, before turning his attention to the other Black Caps. “Is this how all of you feel? Is little Willy here speaking for everyone here, or just himself?”

“I wish people would stop calling me little Willy,” Bescheiden muttered.

“You’ve had your say,” Jan snarled. “Open that festering hole of a mouth once more and I’ll shove my fist so far down your throat it’ll tickle your intestines -got it?” Bescheiden nodded, but did nothing to hide his unhappiness with the situation. The sergeant looked round the other men’s faces. “Well, is this how you feel? Are you so scared of your own shadows that you’re going to run away, like timid little children?”

Raufbold stepped forward, as always unafraid to offer his opinion. “We didn’t come here to get our throats slit or our limbs lopped off because of some vendetta between Schnell and Abram Cobbius.”

“That’s Captain Schnell to you. And who said Cobbius was responsible for Verletzung’s murder?”

“Stands to reason, doesn’t it?” Raufbold maintained. “He butchered Mutig, even carved his initials on the body. Verletzung’s corpse gets delivered to the front door of our station, with a note promising to see the rest of us dead. Well, I know where I’m not wanted and that’s Suiddock. This district got along fine without the Black Caps before we arrived and it’ll do fine without us once we’ve gone.”

“We’re not going anywhere,” Jan vowed. “What kind of men are you, running away the moment somebody threatens you? Since when do the Black Caps give in to intimidation and idle threats?”

“You call what happened to Hans-Michael and Helmut idle threats?” Raufbold sneered.

“No, I call it what it is-murder. And I’m staying here until I see those responsible brought to justice. That’s the difference between you and me, Gorgeous Jorg-I don’t need to swallow a fistful of crimson shade to find my courage. Yes, that’s right, the captain and I know all about your sordid little secret. He wanted to give you a fresh start-didn’t take you long to make a nonsense of that, did it?”

Raufbold sniffed. “I haven’t touched the stuff since-”

“Liar!” Jan snarled. He grabbed Raufbold by the jaw and squeezed, forcing the Black Cap’s mouth open. Inside the gums were stained a virulent crimson, the mark of anyone who used the drug. “How long is it since you had a dose? A day? A few hours?” The sergeant pushed Raufbold away. “You disgust me!”

“What about my brother?” Holismus slurred from the cobbles.

“He was cursed by this place. He got infected by Chaos here and now I’m here, he’s come back to haunt me.”

“We’ve all got our own daemons to face,” Jan replied, “our own dirty little secrets, our own guilty burdens. None of us are perfect, far from it. But that doesn’t mean we give in to our fears, nor should we simply surrender this station to the likes of Abram Cobbius and Adalbert Henschmann. I don’t doubt you saw your brother, Lothar. What happened to Joost was a tragedy-but that doesn’t mean it’ll happen to you too. We have to make a stand against Chaos, against the likes of Cobbius and Casanova. Their kind have ruled this district and too much of this city for too damned long!” “I worked on the docks,” Didier said, all too aware of the loaded crossbow pointed at his chest. The two Black Caps and the creepy priest of Morr had him pinned in a corner of the sewer junction, demanding answers. When somebody’s pointing a crossbow at your heart, you tell them whatever they want to hear, Didier reasoned. In this case, it also happened to be the truth, but that was more coincidence than choice on his part. “But you can’t work on the docks unless you join the guild, so I joined. Don’t know what I did to deserve it, but Cobbius decided I might make a useful foot soldier for his activities. He always needs fresh recruits and if you’ve got half a brain, that’s a bonus.”

“Cobbius? You mean Lea-Jan Cobbius?” the other Black Cap demanded.

Didier shook his head. “Not him, his cousin. Lea-Jan Cobbius always keeps his hands clean. But Abram, he couldn’t care less who knows what he does. I saw him drown a halfling fishmonger not long ago, just to take over his business without paying for it.” Didier noticed his captors exchanging a look that gave him hope. They must already know about what happened to the halfling, but now he was providing them with confirmation from an eyewitness. His value was rising, and faster than the tide of sewage round their ankles. “Afterwards Abram couldn’t stop bragging about what he’d done and how he’d done it, as if drowning a defenceless halfling made him the big man in Suiddock.”

The priest was frowning, apparently deep in thought. “Why would a thug like Cobbius want to take control of a fishmonger’s shop?”

Didier smirked. “It’s a front for his drug smuggling business, isn’t it? Abram’s got a fleet of fishing boats that go out to sea and meet up with smugglers coming back from other countries. They pack the drugs inside the fish and sell them from the market-right next door to your station.”

“That’s why the new manager put his prices up so high,” the woman said, realisation in her voice. “Cobbius isn’t selling the fish,

he's selling the drugs. The fish is merely the packaging to hide his product."

"That's right. Abram's not the brightest, but he's got plenty of animal cunning."

"Torturing and murdering one of my watchmen, that wasn't so cunning. Carving his initials into the dying man's chest-that was an animal marking its territory," the captain spat.

Didier shrugged and smiled. "Like I said, he's not the brightest member of the Cobbius family."

"You think this is funny?"

The prisoner looked down at his feet so the three captors couldn't see his expression. "No, I don't. And neither did Lea-Jan. Once he heard what his cousin had been doing, he had him taken off the street. Abram's been propping up the members' bar at the guild headquarters ever since, where Lea-Jan's men can keep an eye on him. They know you won't dare take him from the building. But Abram is getting bored. Eventually he'll find a way to sneak out, go in search of some entertainment. That's your chance to get him."

"What else?" the captain demanded.

"What do you mean?" Didier asked, stalling for time until he could discover what his captors wanted to know from him.

"Why murder Verletzung?"

"He was following me. I thought he was something else."

"Like what?"

Didier shook his head. "I'm not saying any more about that, not while I'm down here. You get me topside and I might say, but I'm not talking about them while I'm in these tunnels." He folded his arms, making himself look as resolute as possible to convince them. The watch captain glared at him, eyes filled with naked hatred, before motioning for the priest to keep watch over Didier. The two Black Caps retired to the other side of the sewer junction, whispering to each other in voices so low Didier could not hear their words. Eventually the pair returned, having obviously come to some sort of agreement.

"What will it take to get you to talk?" the captain asked.

"I told you-get me topside and we'll see."

"Not about whatever's got you so frightened-I mean talk about Abram Cobbius."

Didier shrugged. "What's on offer?"

"We don't have you publicly executed for murdering Verletzung."

"That's outrageous!" the captive protested. "You can't prove I murdered anyone!"

"We all heard you confess," the woman replied.

"Besides, I have the dead man's body," the priest hissed. "You

know what they say about followers of Morr, don't you? We can make the murdered talk again. Imagine yourself standing on Three Penny Bridge, watched by every citizen in Suiddock, as your victim rises from the dead to name you as his killer. The people would tear you apart. I doubt the watch could save you from such a mob."

"My men would probably help the mob," the captain smiled.

"That's not fair," Didier whined, feeling himself close to tears of desperation.

"Was it fair when you murdered my recruit?"

"I told you, I didn't know he was a Black Cap. I thought he was one of those…" The captive broke down, fear getting the better of his emotions. "Please, you've got to get me out of here. I can't take it down in these sewers any longer. Please!"

"Perhaps we should leave him down here for a day or two," the woman suggested to her captain. "Lash him to these corpses, see how he likes spending time with his dead comrades."

"By Manann, anything but that! I'll say whatever you want!"

"You'll bear witness against Abram Cobbius?"

"Yes, anything! Anything! I'll even give you his boss, if you want!" Didier begged, his last shred of self-respect torn away by terror. "I'll give you Adalbert Henschmann himself-just get me out of here!"

"Abram Cobbius is one of Henschmann's lieutenants?" the captain asked.

"Yes, of course he is. He's-" The captive stopped, realising too late his mistake.

The captain smiled broadly. "Thank you, Deschamp. You've just made my day."

Didier felt his legs gave way and he slid down the wall into the sewage, letting it swirl around him. "You make me repeat that in public and I'm a dead man," he whispered.

"You say that as if it should mean something to us," the female Black Cap replied. "It doesn't."

Didier trembled, his hands falling into the foul brown liquid. "You don't understand. Henschmann won't have me killed. He'll have me tortured by the guards on Rijker's. When my spirit is utterly crushed, he might bother to have me murdered. But I'll spend every moment until that happens, knowing it's coming dreading every day, every hour, every minute. I can't cope with that," he said, his voice dropping to a whisper. His fingers brushed across something sharp and metallic in the sewage-a blade! Someone must have dropped a dagger here earlier, and now he had it. Didier closed his fingers around the hilt, a last vestige of hope returning to him. The captive stood up again, holding the weapon he'd found against his own neck. "Now I don't

have to!"

The priest raised an eyebrow at him. "You intend to kill yourself?"

"What do you think?" Didier screamed, willing himself to plunge the dagger into his own throat.

"I recommend you slice up and down, rather than going from side to side. You'll find the windpipe surprisingly resistant to that dull blade. But puncture one hole in the blue vein that runs vertically down beside it and you'll bleed to death within moments. Your decision, of course."

"What kind of ghoul are you, telling a man how best to kill myself?" Didier sobbed, his hand shaking as it tried to keep the dagger steady.

"I live with death, I walk in its shadow," the priest replied. "I've seen men die with courage on their faces and others soil themselves as the darkness claimed them. I'm merely giving you the benefit of my experience. But I doubt you have the courage to kill yourself, Deschamp."

"You're playing a dangerous game," the captain hissed out the side of his mouth.

"I'm not afraid to die!" Didier howled.

"Perhaps not, but you're too weak to commit suicide," the priest observed. "Surrender the knife."

The captive pulled back the blade, as if about to plunge it into his neck, but his will deserted him. The weapon tumbled from his grasp and plopped back into the sewage. Didier wept for his lost courage, utterly ashamed. He watched as his captors relaxed, the female Black Cap lowering the crossbow slightly.

"What now?" she asked her captain.

"Take Deschamp back to the station. Don't put him in the cells on the ground floor, shackle him to the desk in my office and lock the door so nobody can get at him. You can tell Sergeant Woxholt what Deschamp told us, but nobody else. For all we know Henschmann has an informant planted among the Black Caps. If he does, they'll report Deschamp's capture and then our problems really start. Once you've got the prisoner secured, tell the sergeant to have a Black Cap keeping watch over the guild headquarters until I return, but not to make a move on Cobbius until I get back."

"Get back? From where?"

He jerked a thumb towards the other tunnels. "I've got to go and find Faulheit. We're already two men short, thanks to Cobbius and his friend here. I can't afford to lose any more, even when they're as bone idle and lazy as Martin Faulheit." The captain turned to his other companion. "Otto, will you help Belladonna get the prisoner back to

Three Penny Bridge? I know it's not your responsibility, but-"

The priest cut him short with a nod. "It would be an honour."

"Thanks." The captain glared at Deschamp. "Give them any trouble and you'll answer to me."

Didier laughed. "Go down those tunnels and you'll know all about trouble." A moment later he had the point of the captain's short sword jabbing at his chest.

"What do you mean? What's down there?"

"You'll see. Whether you'll live to tell the tale-that's another matter, captain." A crowd of citizens had gathered to watch Jan confront his men. Word had spread the Black Caps were pulling out after only a few days on Three Penny Bridge. Now people were coming to jeer or cheer, depending upon how they felt about the Watch and its men. Instead they found Jan fighting to rally his men's spirits. The sergeant glanced round and saw the people watching him and the rest of the Black Caps, waiting for the outcome. "Look about you, men. These are the citizens you're supposed to serve. These are the people who pay your wages. They deserve better than to see us skulk away with our tails between our legs, simply because the powers that be here in Suiddock decide to frighten us off. If you leave now, you're abandoning these people. This is probably the last chance the Watch will have to establish a meaningful presence in the district. Leave now and the next group that gets sent here won't have a chance. Nobody will believe in them, because you fled when the going got tough!"

"Where's the captain?" Bescheiden demanded. "How come you're here, giving us the big speech about why we should stay? Why isn't the mighty Kurt Schnell here to convince us, eh?"

"I told you before," Jan growled. "He's Captain Schnell to you. Learn to show him the proper respect, or else I'll thrash it into you."

"He's gone down the sewers to gather evidence about who murdered Verletzung," Gerta added.

"There," Jan said. "He's out doing his job! Why aren't you?"

"Somebody told them the station was being shut down," Scheusal replied. "I didn't believe it, but some of them couldn't wait to collect their things and get out of here."

"Who told you that?" Jan demanded of Raufbold, but the Black Cap could only shrug. Bescheiden was the same when confronted. The sergeant shook his head, disgusted with them. "Leave this place now and you'll be branded cowards for the rest of your lives. Even when people have forgotten your names or your faces, they'll remember the watchmen who ran at the first sign of danger, the Black Caps who didn't have the guts to stand and fight. Even when everybody else has forgotten that, one person will still know that you're a coward-and

that's you. There's no escaping your fear, but you can't let that fear rule your lives!"

Narbig stepped forward, breaking his usual taciturn tendency to speak. "So what do we do?"

"We stay," the sergeant said, fire and iron in his voice. "We see this thing to the end, no matter what that end is. I've known Captain Schnell from the first day he arrived in this city, and he never runs away from a fight. He may start more than his fair share of fights, but he also finishes them. Now, who's going to do their duty? Who's going to stand up for the people of Suiddock?"

"I will, sergeant," Scheusal replied immediately. Narbig moved to his side and nodded.

"I'll stay," Gerta said. "Here's as good a place as any to be, if I can't be with my Engelbert."

Holismus stood up, swaying as he did so. The bottle was still in one hand but his other hand was saluting Jan. "I'm with you, sergeant."

Jan glared at Raufbold and Bescheiden. "What about you two?"

Raufbold shrugged. "I suppose I'll stay too."

Bescheiden looked at him, surprised. "If Gorgeous Jorg is staying, so am I."

"Good," the sergeant said. "We're two men down, so I'm reorganising the shifts until the commander deigns to give us some reinforcements. From now on it'll have to be two shifts-one day and one night. Raufbold, you'll be on days with Speer, Faulheit and me. Scheusal, you'll take charge of nights. Narbig, Bescheiden and Holismus will be reporting to you. Any questions?" Jan waited but the only reply was silence. "Good. Well, you've got your assignments, get to them. Raufbold, get out on patrol-"

"But I was on graveyard shift until dawn!"

"Tough. With all that crimson shade in your system, you won't need to sleep for days yet. Go on, get out on your patrol. I'll see you on the streets. The rest of you, go get ready for night shift. From now on the night shift patrols in pairs, so you can back each other up. Go!"

The night shift wandered into the station, Narbig and Holismus helping Gerta get the provisions and cooking pots back inside. Raufbold stalked off towards Stoessel, muttering under his breath. The sergeant watched him go with quiet satisfaction, before looking at the gathered citizens. "Well, what you waiting for? Move along! There's nothing to see here." Kurt waited until Otto and Belladonna had taken Deschamp away before he went in search of Faulheit. If the prisoner's cryptic warnings about what was waiting down the tunnel were accurate, Kurt didn't want the others coming back to help him. Better to face whatever was ahead alone, rather than risk all three of their

lives. He edged his way into the tunnel Faulheit had taken, short sword drawn and ready. He had heard a shriek of fear from Faulheit not long after the flabby Black Cap had crawled into the tunnel, suggesting something surprising was not far along the circular shaft.

Kurt took another step forward but his foot slid out from under him, as the floor abruptly tilted downwards. He tried to recover but lost his balance and fell, the impact bouncing him forwards. Then he was sliding feet-first down a steep slope, accompanied by sewage sluicing him down into darkness. Just as he was getting used to the sliding effect, the tunnel ended and Kurt fell into a brick-lined chamber, splashing to a halt amidst piles of bones and scraps of skin.

"Taal's teeth!" He fought to extricate himself from the clinging mess of rotting body remnants, scrambling to his feet. As Kurt stood up, he became aware of a glowing green light that bathed him from above. But this was no phosphorescence. This light came from thousands of tiny shapes, wriggling across the ceiling. Beyond them he could see more bones and human remains, held above the sewage-soaked floor in a cat's cradle of skin and sinew. Kurt realised he had fallen into some kind of charnel pit, a storehouse of flesh and blood for Sigmar knew what kind of monster.

"Captain? Is that you?" a weak voice asked from the shadows.

Kurt spun round to see his missing recruit cowering in a corner, the terrified Black Cap hugging his knees to his chest. "Faulheit? Are you hurt?"

The fat man shook his head, fear etched into tear-stained features. "They haven't come for me yet," he replied, before gesturing to the opposite corner of the chamber. "He wasn't so lucky."

Steeling himself, the captain looked over his shoulder at where Faulheit was pointing. It was a man's body-at least, what was left of it. Both legs were gone, one completely and the other from the knee down. The flesh above that joint had also been stripped away, revealing the thighbone, white and exposed. There were scratches on the bone, Kurt thought. No, not scratches. Bite marks. Vicious incisors had gnawed at the bone in their eagerness to get the last morsel of flesh from it. One of the arms was just as bad, but the right remained intact. The face was sickening. Something had feasted on the cheeks, eaten through them and taken the tongue from inside the mouth as well. Kurt fought back the urge to retch as he regarded the hollow, empty spaces where the dead man's eyes should have been. Perhaps most terrifying of all was the fact this person had been chained to the wall, to stop them escaping. Kurt recognised the padlocks used to secure the chains, they were a common type sold by ironmongers across Marienburg. That suggested the prisoner had been left here by people from above the surface, offered as a sacrifice for whatever

resided in the catacombs below Suiddock. The captain silently prayed the victim had not survived too long, else the horror of being slowly eaten alive would have driven them mad.

Something about the body rung a bell in Kurt's memory, despite its horrific state. He moved closely and stumbled over a submerged skull on the floor. He tumbled to the floor, soaking himself in the process. But the liquid down here was mostly sea water, not the mess of sewage that had clung to him in the higher tunnel. That suggested the catacombs were regularly flooded by the rising tide. How long was it until the next high tide? Kurt couldn't remember precisely, especially after having been underground for what felt like a lifetime. The sooner he and Faulheit got out of here, the better.

The fall had dumped Kurt right beside the unfortunate, half-eaten body. Now he was close to it, the captain studied the dead prisoner's face, the initial shock of its ravaged appearance having passed. He could make out a mass of black, curly hair round the scalp and the nose had a distinctive hook in it. A worrying thought occurred to the captain. He reached across to the dead man's remaining hand, noticing for the first time that it was gloved. Kurt peeled away the glove and, sure enough, found six fingers, not five. "Fingers Blake!" the captain exclaimed. "But what's he doing down here?"

"Fingers who?" Faulheit asked.

"It's too much of a coincidence," Kurt mused to himself. "Somebody must have known about his involvement with the murdered elf and brought Blake down here, knowing what would happen to him."

"Captain," his recruit hissed. "We need to get away from this place!"

"No, not somebody-Deschamp. That's why he was down here last night. He must have dumped Blake in this place and was returning to the surface when Verletzung confronted him. As far as we were concerned, Blake would have simply vanished." Kurt rose and went to Faulheit, offering a hand to help him up. "Come on. We've got to get out of here."

The Black Cap hauled himself up from the corner. "That's what I've been telling you!"

"Good." Kurt peered up at the opening high in the wall of the charnel pit. "Not much chance of going back up that way." The chamber had two exits at ground level, one to their left and one to their right. "You got any preferences which way we go?"

Faulheit shook his head. "I've been smelling the sea coming from that direction," he said, pointing to the right exit. "I've heard things moving from the other side, but nothing you'd call reassuring."

The captain took a deep breath and nodded. "That's good enough

for me. Right it is!" Belladonna was grateful to have Otto helping her get Deschamp to the station. Twice the prisoner tried to escape while they were still in the sewers, but the priest dragged him back. Once they had manhandled Deschamp up the ladder to the alleyway beside the Golden Lotus Dreaming House, Otto removed his rope belt and used it to tie the prisoner's hands. Deschamp responded by screaming about Black Cap brutality and pleading with passers-by to intercede as they marched to Three Penny Bridge. Belladonna soon tired of his whining and called a halt. She removed her left boot, slipped a stocking off her leg and stuffed it into his mouth to shut him up. "Thank Morr for that," Otto sighed.

The unlikely trio continued the rest of their journey without speaking, their progress accompanied by bemused whispers from people on the cobbled streets and the cries of seagulls circling overhead. Once they reached the station, Otto retrieved his belt and bid farewell to Belladonna. She pushed the prisoner inside, where Woxholt was talking with Gerta by reception. "Who's your friend?" the sergeant asked. Belladonna removed her stocking from Deschamp's mouth so he could introduce himself. Instead the prisoner let loose a tirade of curses and abuse so foul it made the drunks and pickpockets in the holding cells cringe. "Quite the charmer," Woxholt observed. "Gerta, have you got anything to wash out this man's filthy mouth?"

"There's a cake of soap in the ablutions room, but it's been near Bescheiden's feet-"

"That'll do nicely," the sergeant decided and shoved Deschamp towards the east stairs. Belladonna followed them up to the first floor, explaining Kurt's instructions to Woxholt. "This detestable worm is willing to bear witness against Cobbius and Casanova?" Woxholt asked.

"If we can keep him alive long enough to do so," she said. They found a set of shackles and used them to chain Deschamp to the captain's desk. Woxholt locked the office door and pocketed the key, yawning heartily. Black rings ran beneath his eyes, evidence of the sergeant's exhaustion.

"You should get some rest," Belladonna urged. "I can watch over the station for an hour or two."

"I'm in charge of the day shift," he said. "It's my responsibility to-"

"You'll be no use to anyone if you collapse on the job," she interrupted. "Get some sleep. Now."

The sergeant smiled. "Who put you in charge?"

"Call it my maternal streak coming out," Belladonna replied. "Trust me, it doesn't happen often."

“I hope so. Gerta’s been mothering the station since she got here, we don’t need two like her.”

“Stop changing the subject and go.”

“I’m going!” Woxholt dawdled towards the watchmen’s sleeping quarters, but paused in the doorway to look back at her. “Raufbold’s out on patrol but he should be back soon. Send him to keep watch over the guild’s headquarters until the night shift come on duty.” Kurt and Faulheit crept through the catacombs, increasingly aware of disturbing sounds nearby. Skittering and scratching noises echoed through the tunnels, like talons or claws scraping against stone. High-pitched, inhuman cries rent the air, setting both men’s nerves on edge. The smell of sea air was getting stronger all the time, and the catacombs were becoming lighter, both causes for hope. But still the noises grew in volume. The pair pressed on, relieved to realise the path was leading them upwards to a higher level. At last they rounded a corner and saw a hole in the wall. Grey sky was visible through its rusted metal bars. The pair quickened their pace, eager to get out of the oppressive catacombs. To Kurt it felt as though they had been trapped underground for hours, marching through tombs of stone. Now, finally, escape was close.

He reached the window first and looked out. Water lapped at the wall directly below, so they were still lower than street level. In the distance he could see an island, but the water between it and Riddra was much choppier than that usually seen in the Rijksweg. “That’s Rijker’s Isle,” he realised. “We must have been travelling west all this time. This is the far end of the Riddra.”

“Like I care,” Faulheit replied. “Are we getting out of here or what?”

The captain stepped back to get a better look at the bars across the opening in the wall. They were part of a frame bolted into the stone, but the joints were corroded from years of exposure to seawater and the elements. “Give me a hand, see if we can move these bars.” Faulheit grabbed one side while Kurt took hold of the other. Both men leaned backwards, but the frame didn’t budge. “We need to get more leverage. Brace your legs against the wall and pull harder.”

Faulheit did as he was told, following Kurt’s example. They strained and strained but, although the metal frame creaked and complained, the bars stayed in place. “It’s no good,” Faulheit gasped, after abandoning his efforts. “We’ll never move it. We have to find another way out.” As if in reply to his words, a fresh scream of animal hunger bellowed from the catacombs behind them. Meanwhile the rising tide was starting to lap at the base of the window, the first few drops of seawater finding their way inside. Within a few minutes those drops would become a flood and the Black Caps would have to flee.

“I don’t think there is another way out,” Kurt snarled. “Now put your back into it!” Together they resumed their unequal battle with the bars, the captain slamming both feet against the wall and leaning back with all his weight. Faulheit did the same and was rewarded with a first bolt breaking free. “It’s going!” Kurt yelled. “Keep pulling, keep pulling!”

When the frame gave way, it dumped both Black Caps on to the floor with a sudden jolt. The two men lay there for a moment, catching their breath. Kurt was about to rise when something caught his attention and he stopped to stare at the stone ceiling overhead. Faulheit got back to his feet and measured his bulky waist against the width of the empty window. “I think I can get out through here.” He looked back down at the captain, who was still lying on the floor. “What’s going on? I thought we were getting out?”

“In a moment.” Kurt pointed up at a series of inscriptions and drawings carved into the stones that covered the ceiling. The images were crudely done, not work that would fill any artist with pride, but still told a vivid story. Elves in grand ships arrived at a cluster of rocks. The rocks became castles. Bridges appeared between the castles. Men and small figures appeared. Soon the settlement was a mass of people and shapes, evolving into the organised anarchy of a city. Beneath all this was a series of recurring symbols. Sometimes there were many symbols, while in some areas they shrank to a few, the amount ebbing and flowing like the tide. “It’s the story of the city,” Kurt realised. “It’s the story of how Marienburg was founded and grew.”

Faulheit pointed at the recurring symbols beneath the drawings. “So what do those mean?”

“I’ve seen something like them once before,” Kurt said with a shudder. “They are the mark of a race of monsters, terrifying creatures meant to exist only in nightmares and legends-the stuff of myth and fables. Beasts that hunt in packs and feed on human flesh for their succour, vile vermin that walk on two legs and stand tall as any man.” The captain looked at Faulheit. “You know what they are, don’t you?” The Black Cap shook his head, but his eyes told the truth. “Say it, Faulheit.”

He swallowed hard, his words when they came little more than a whisper. “Ratmen.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The sun was setting as Kurt and Faulheit made it back to Three Penny Bridge. The tide had been pouring through the empty window by the time the two men had spotted a boatman passing close to the western tip of Riddra. They had beckoned him over and clambered out of the window into his small vessel, Faulheit nearly capsizing it in the process. Kurt offered the boatman double the normal charge to take them directly to the cut nearest Three Penny Bridge. From there the two Black Caps had clambered up to street level and made their way to the station.

Not once did either man breathe a word of what they had seen or discovered in the catacombs. Kurt was still mulling over the terrifying implications of what he had learned and Faulheit was simply terrified, his face ashen and hands quivering with fear. As they approached the station, Kurt took hold of his companion's shoulder. "Don't tell anyone what we saw down there. If people hear that the-that those things-might have been living beneath Suiddock, it'll create a panic that would undo all our good work here."

Faulheit stared at the captain, wide-eyed. "You're serious? You think we can stay here?"

"We don't know for certain those things are still in the catacombs. They could have moved on."

"You heard them down there-we both did. I saw what happened to Fingers Blake, just like you!"

"Listen to me," Kurt pleaded. "Most of the people in this city don't know those creatures even exist. Taal's teeth, I've never seen one myself, and I hope I never do. But even if they are still down there in the catacombs-and I'm not saying they are-that doesn't make them a threat to us."

"I'll keep my mouth shut on one condition," Faulheit hissed.

"Name it."

"I want a transfer. I don't care what station or where it is. Send me to Doodkanaal if you have to, but I want off Three Penny Bridge. Now. Today."

Kurt nodded. "I'll send a messenger to headquarters, requesting your transfer. But it won't come through today, you know that as well as I. Transfers need a minimum of three weeks to take effect."

"I want out of this station by Geheimnistag," the watchman snarled. "Guarantee me that and I'll keep quiet about what I know. Deal?"

The captain sighed. "Deal." Kurt offered the hand of friendship. "Shake on it?"

"Just send the messenger," Faulheit replied, before marching into the station.

Kurt followed him inside and found Belladonna slumped at reception, yawning. She snapped to attention on seeing him enter. "You made it back. Where was Faulheit?"

"I'll tell you, but not here," he said, keeping his voice low so Gerta couldn't hear it from where she was standing at the other end of the long desk. "Where's Jan?"

"Sleeping. Raufbold's keeping an eye on the guild headquarters, and I've just sent Scheusal and Bescheiden to relieve him." She detailed the new two-shift system instituted by the sergeant. "Narbig and Holismus are out on patrol, covering Stoessel and Luydenhoek-Woxholt wanted two-man pairs on patrols."

"Sensible decision," Kurt agreed. He noticed Belladonna stifling another yawn. "Not keeping you up too late, are we?"

She smiled. "Manning reception isn't my idea of excitement, and it's not the reason I volunteered for your station. If I wanted to be behind a desk, I could have stayed at headquarters."

The captain walked to the entrance. "Come with me and you'll get all the excitement you want."

"Where are you going?"

"To arrest Abram Cobbius for the murders of Mutig and Vink the Halfling-coming?"

Belladonna laughed. "I wouldn't miss it for the world. Faulheit!" The weary watchman was talking with one of the prisoners in the holding cells. He twisted round to look at her. "You're in charge until Narbig and Holismus get back!" She ran out of the station before he could protest his shift had just ended. Abram was sick to the back teeth of staying inside the guild headquarters. He felt like he was being kept under house arrest in the ornate building, unable to go out and enjoy the dubious delights available for a price on Riddra. He was a Cobbius after all, a family that had worked on Suiddock's quays and wharves for generations. He was used to having the smell of the sea in his nostrils, and the cry of gulls in his ears. Instead he had spent the past two days living in the lap of luxury and it was starting to go stale.

At least, he thought it had been two days-it could have been more or less, but life inside the headquarters had a timeless quality that made it impossible for him to judge how many days had passed. Most of the windows were shuttered or covered by heavy curtains to stop anyone outside seeing what happened within the building. Night and day were little different, as the guild members' bars served drinks around the clock and the private bordello also operated from one dawn to the next without stopping. We never close, that had been Abram's suggestion for what to call the bordello. He'd enjoyed his

own display of wits for hours afterwards, but even that joke was beginning to pall. He wanted to get out.

Abram's cousin had twice summoned him to the guild boardroom during this sojourn. The first occasion was not long after Abram arrived at the headquarters. The two men had met a few times before, but Abram had never been graced with an invitation to Lea-Jan's sanctum.

The room was simply furnished, little within it to suggest the occupant was among the most powerful men in Marienburg. Lea-Jan himself was tall and lanky, powerfully muscled despite the fact he must be at least sixty summers old. The snow-white hair cropped close to his scalp was the best clue to his age, but his steel-grey eyes were still as terrifying as Abram had recalled.

Lea-Jan had welcomed his cousin warmly enough and asked how long Abram intended to stay. The younger Cobbius had been vague about this, failing to point out it was Lea-Jan's men who had grabbed him off the streets of Suiddock and brought him to guild headquarters. Word had reached Lea-Jan about the long, slow murder of that stupid Black Cap who had challenged Abram to a fight in Vollmer's Rest. Lea-Jan also knew all about the halfling who drowned, and suggested bragging about involvement in such an unfortunate accident was perhaps less than wise. Abram had nodded his agreement, knowing better than to refute his cousin's advice. They had parted on friendly terms, although Abram had little doubt Lea-Jan was a reluctant host.

The second summoning was considerably less convivial. Lea-Jan was infuriated by what that fool Deschamp had done in the sewers. That was bad enough, but he also knew of Abram's decision to have the Black Cap's corpse delivered to the watch station and what the threatening note sent with it had said. Lea-Jan was sat behind his desk when Abram was brought before him, the older man's face seething with rage. Abram tried to apologise, but Lea-Jan didn't want to hear it. "I understand you have allowed yourself to be linked with Henschmann and his League of Gentlemen Entrepreneurs."

Abram opened his mouth to deny this but closed it again, knowing a lie would only subtract from his life expectancy. Instead he nodded, staring at the floor to avoid his cousin's venomous gaze.

"You fool. The guild survives and prospers because it steers clear of such entanglements," Lea-Jan snarled. "Men like Casanova come and go, but the guild is eternal. To stay that way, it must maintain an iron grip upon the docks of this city. They are the lifeblood of Marienburg and, by definition, of the Empire. What our stevedores and teamsters do affects the lives of innumerable people. By comparison, Henschmann is a petty thief who will one day be stabbed in the back by another petty thief. His time as leader of that so-called

crime syndicate is limited. The guild has held true power in this city for more than a century. But your actions threaten to embarrass and endanger it, and I cannot allow that."

"I'm sorry, cousin," Abram whispered. "I didn't realise."

"That much is obvious," Lea-Jan said with withering distaste. "Were you not related to me by blood, you would already be floating face-down in a cut somewhere near Doodkanaal. As it stands, I've no wish to see your mother-my aunt-weeping for her son the simpleton. You will remain on these premises until Geheimnistag. My sources tell me the station on Three Penny Bridge is unlikely to survive beyond the Day of Mystery. If that proves accurate, you can return to the outside world as a free man."

"Thank you, cousin," Abram replied, before the meaning of Lea-Jan's words struck home. "A free man? Do you mean I'd no longer be a member of the guild?"

"You have aligned yourself with Henschmann, so you have chosen your fate. I will continue to clean up after your messes for now. Come Geheimnistag I will wash my hands of you. Until then, you can stay here and enjoy my protection. Whatever you desire within these walls is yours for the taking. But set foot outside this building and I will not be responsible for the consequences."

Abram had walked backwards out of Lea-Jan's office, not daring to look his cousin in the eye. Since then he had tried his best to savour the wine, women and song freely available to him, but the joy was gone. To lose his membership of the guild was to lose privileged status. He might still be able to trade on his surname for a while, but word would soon spread about Lea-Jan's attitude toward him. A bleak future loomed and it hampered his enjoyment of the last few days he had left in paradise. That enjoyment was compromised by having two of his cousin's bodyguards watching him around the clock to ensure he didn't try to leave the building. Eventually, Abram got himself drunker than he'd even been before and decided there was only one course of action left-to cross the cobbles between the guild headquarters and the Marienburg Gentlemen's Club. The sooner he threw his lot in with Henschmann, the better his prospects would be. Now all he needed to do was lose his twin shadows.

Abram waited until one of them slipped away to the privy before offering to buy the other a drink from a thick, cut glass decanter of aquavit. The surly guard refused, turning away from him in disgust. Abram smashed the decanter down on the guard's head, knocking him out cold. After that it was a simple task to walk from the building, though his double vision and uncertain feet did little to help.

Eventually he found an external door and pulled it open, half expecting blazing sunshine to blind him. Instead it was dark and

murky outside, a hint of blue visible in the bruised sky. That suggested the sun had set in the past hour and it was early evening, or else it was dawn and the sun would soon be rising. Neither made much difference to Abram, whose sole intent was staggering twenty paces to the gentlemen's club. Filling his lungs with the sea air once more, Abram lurched out of his sanctuary and promptly flopped face-first into the cobbled street, breaking his nose for the second time in recent days. Scheusal yawned and stretched, stamping his boots on the street to force some life into his weary legs. He and Bescheiden had been watching the western side of the guild headquarters all night, waiting in vain for Abram Cobbius to show his ugly face. Twice Bescheiden had slipped away, supposedly to empty his bladder, but Scheusal had his own suspicions. He trusted Bescheiden about as far as he could throw the weasel-faced watchman, and it wouldn't surprise him in the slightest if little Willy was making sly visits to the nearby Marienburg Gentlemen's Club to report on the Black Caps' activities. Scheusal wondered how far Bescheiden would go for guilders. Everybody had a price, he supposed, but how many guilders would it take to turn Bescheiden completely?

Scheusal knew the captain and Belladonna were lurking in the shadows on the western side of guild headquarters. They had established a signal to communicate with each other, two long whistles followed by a short one every hour. If either pair caught sight of the elusive Cobbius, they were to whistle for help from the others.

Like most of the Black Caps stationed at Three Penny Bridge, Scheusal had noticed Belladonna and the captain spent a lot of time in each other's company. That had created no shortage of salacious gossip from the likes of Raufbold and Faulheit, but Scheusal felt it was driven by jealousy rather than fact. He made a habit of observing people, their habits and how they were together.

You could tell a lot by the way two people stood when they were talking, how their bodies reacted to one another. Belladonna was at ease with the captain, confident in his presence, as if they were old friends. By comparison, he was more upright and formal around her, as if aware of her femininity but making an effort not to give any sign it meant something to him. No, they were not lovers -no matter what Gorgeous Jorg and Martin might be claiming in the men's quarters.

It was close to dawn when Bescheiden slipped away for his third bladder break, leaving Scheusal alone once more. He was looking forward to the shift ending and getting some sleep. Hard to believe it was Konistag, Scheusal thought. The watch had been back on Three Penny Bridge only three days, yet-

His musings were abruptly broken by a door swinging open at the base of the guild headquarters, yellow light spilling out past a

heavyset man. The silhouetted figure looked up at the sky for several moments, before lurching forward into the street. As he did, the light of a gas lamp fell on his face and Scheusal gasped. It was Cobbius! The Black Cap patted all his pockets, searching for the whistle every watchman was issued with at their induction. He pulled it clear of his tunic and pressed the end to his lips, ready to blow a shrill blast, summoning the captain and Belladonna. But when he looked across at the doorway again, there was no sign of Cobbius. Sweet Shallya, don't tell me I've missed my chance, Scheusal thought.

He lumbered towards the open doorway, running as fast as his bulky physique would allow. As he got closer, Scheusal saw a body sprawled face down across the cobbles. A pool of liquid was gathering beneath the head. Please don't let Cobbius be dead, Scheusal prayed. He knelt beside the body and was relieved to discover Abram was snoring. He wasn't dead, merely dead drunk and the blood was pouring from a broken nose. Scheusal found his whistle once more and blew with all his might. Once he heard the sound of footsteps and saw Kurt running towards him, Scheusal relaxed. "That was easier than I expected," he muttered to himself, smiling broadly. It took all four of them to get Cobbius back to Three Penny Bridge, half carrying and half dragging his ale-sodden body as the sun rose over Marienburg. The quartet of Black Caps staggered into the station and dumped Abram on the floor in front of Jan. The sergeant folded his arms and glared at the snoring prisoner. "Well done," he said to Kurt and the others. "It can't have been easy subduing him."

"You'd be surprised," Kurt grinned. "Where do you suggest we keep him?"

Jan glanced at the holding cells, where half a dozen vagrants, drunks and cutpurses were staring in amazement at the unconscious Cobbius. "Not in there, that's for certain. I don't think we'll be able to keep his arrest quiet for long but having him on display is asking for trouble and I think we've had more than our fair share of that already. So that leaves upstairs-"

"Perhaps not," Belladonna interjected. "Considering who's up there in the captain's office."

"He is still up there, isn't he?" Kurt asked, his eyes looking to the ceiling.

"Our friend is here alright," Jan confirmed. "He's spent most of the night whining and moaning but he's still with us. Says if we don't feed him soon, he'll recant his witness statement."

"Has he made a witness statement yet?"

"No. I was waiting until you got back," the sergeant said. "How about we put the Suiddock snoring champion in the basement? We can chain Cobbius to one of the walls for now." Jan sniffed the air, his

expression souring at the strong odour of stale ale wafting from Cobbius. “He’ll probably get his legs soaked when the tide comes in later, but a free bath wouldn’t go amiss in his case.”

Kurt nodded. “Scheusal and Bescheiden, drag our friend here down to the basement and get him secured. Once that’s finished, you can get some sleep. You’ve both done well.”

“Shouldn’t we have someone guarding him?” Scheusal asked, nudging Cobbius with a boot.

“The day shift will take it in turns,” Jan replied. “On you go.” Once the two watchmen had dragged the prisoner away, Kurt motioned for Jan and Belladonna to join him upstairs. They went into the mess to talk, gratefully accepting hot drinks and breakfast from Gerta. When she’d returned to the kitchen, Kurt shared with the others all he’d learned during his time in the catacombs. He concluded by saying the same name that had so terrified Faulheit. Belladonna rolled her eyes in disbelief.

“Ratmen? You can’t be serious, captain. They’re a legend, a nightmare told by siblings to frighten children at bedtime. I mean, do you honestly believe there’s an entire race of ratmen living in underground cities beneath the Empire that has somehow escaped detection for centuries?”

“Just because you’ve never seen them, that doesn’t mean they don’t exist,” Kurt said.

“I believe in things I can see, smell, touch, taste or hear,” she replied. “Matters of faith are for priests and zealots. I believe in the evidence of my senses, no more and no less. It’s one of the reasons I abandoned my studies in the temples of Morr. Blind faith can stop you from seeing the truth.”

The captain turned to Jan. “What do you believe in?”

His sergeant shrugged. “If you believe in these ratmen, so do I. I don’t need to see the sun rising in the morning to believe it will rise again tomorrow. Besides, if what you say is true, it would explain a presence I’ve been feeling since setting foot in this station. An angry, malevolent hatred-and it’s growing stronger. Almost as if evil is gnawing at the foundations of this place, hungry for something it can’t have.” He noticed the other two staring at him. “Well, you asked what I believe in. That’s the truth.”

“Fine,” Kurt said with a shrug. “I haven’t see these ratmen for myself, but I’ve seen what they can do and we should be thankful they stay below ground. Up here on the surface we’re still safe from them.”

Belladonna finished her breakfast and pushed the plate to one side. “For the sake of argument, let’s say these creatures exist. Could they have been responsible for murdering Arullen Silvermoon?” She explained about the two different hairs on the dead elf’s body. “I

didn't get a chance to examine the second hair, but it didn't appear-well-it didn't look human."

"From what I know of the ratmen, they're not in the habit of attacking lone elves and dumping the bodies above ground," Kurt said.

"Perhaps the elf blundered into the catacombs and saw them," Jan speculated. "They pursued him to the surface and killed him above ground. That would explain where Silvermoon's body was found."

"He was attacked twice," Belladonna pointed out. "I'm certain the first attacker was a balding man in their forties, with greying hair, who stabbed Arullen with a blade. The animal attack came second."

Kurt snapped his fingers, a look of realisation spreading across his face. "Terfel said Henschmann had been transporting contraband through the catacombs and sewers beneath Suiddock, yes?" Belladonna nodded. "That couldn't have happened with these ratmen down there, unless Henschmann had some kind of arrangement with them. When you examined where the elf's body was dumped, you said it had been posed. Maybe whoever put it there was sending a message to Henschmann."

"What kind of message?" she wondered.

"I don't know," he admitted. "But I know a man who does." Didier was starving. He'd been shackled to the desk in Kurt's locked office overnight, but nobody had offered him anything to eat. To make matters worse, somebody nearby was cooking the most delicious smelling food Didier had ever had near his nostrils. He tried calling out for help, but nobody came. What was this, some kind of revenge for murdering that Black Cap in the sewers? He hadn't meant to kill, it was a lucky shot more than anything else. When Didier heard the office door unlocking, he was ready to tell his captors anything in exchange for food. The watch captain was first through the door, followed by that female Black Cap and the station sergeant. All stared at Didier as if he was something they would cheerfully scrape off their boots. He sniffed the air and realised how rank he must smell. That was no surprise after two days without a bath and much of those days spent wading through liquid sewage. "Well?" he demanded. "When are you going to feed me?"

"We'll give you all the food you want," the captain replied.

"About bloody time," Didier sighed.

"We'll even arrange for you to get a good soak, maybe some fresh clothes," the sergeant added.

"Sounds good-but food first, right?"

"We're planning to chain you up in the basement, next to your friend Cobbius," the woman said.

That stopped Didier short. “Abram Cobbius-you’ve arrested him? He’s here, in the station?”

“Brought him in this morning,” she smiled. “He must have gotten bored inside the guild headquarters and decided to go for a stroll-just as you predicted. We’ll make sure to tell him how helpful you were once he sobers up. I’m sure the two of you will have plenty to talk about when Cobbius hears that.”

“You can’t! He’ll murder me!”

“Much like you murdered Verletzung,” the captain observed.

“Who?”

“The watchman you slaughtered in the sewer-remember?”

“Of course I remember, I was-” Didier broke down, fear and hunger and despair getting the better of him. Once he’d stopped sobbing he glared at his tormentors. “What do you want?”

“That’s better,” the captain said, closing and locking the door. “Tell us what we need to know, and we’ll get you food, fresh clothes and a bath.”

“Waste our time and we’ll chain you up beside your friend Cobbius,” the sergeant added.

“Fine, whatever-ask your questions.”

“Tell us about those creatures in the catacombs. Tell us about the ratmen.”

Didier soiled himself at the mere mention of that name. Raufbold met Henschmann’s messenger by the station privy not long after dawn. “Tell your boss Captain Schnell has arrested Abram Cobbius. The drunken fool’s still sleeping off his hangover, but that won’t last forever. If Henschmann wants Abram silenced or sprung, he’d better do it soon.” The messenger passed a rolled strip of paper through a gap in the privy wall, both ends pinched shut. Raufbold tore open the tiny package and emptied the contents directly into his mouth, using a grubby finger to rub crimson shade into his gums. The messenger was already gone when the drugs kicked in. Kurt refused to let Deschamp clean himself until the prisoner talked, so he talked, exhausting what little he knew about the malignant ratmen. “Henschmann has been using the sewers for years to shift contraband during daylight. Not long after the last watch captain in Suiddock tried to drown himself, some of Henschmann’s thugs discovered a stairwell leading down into the catacombs. There’d always been rumours about an underground city, but nobody had believed it. Henschmann sent two dozen men down to explore it-only one came back alive. He was an emissary for the ratmen, infected with some plague that ate the flesh from his bones. He stayed alive long enough to deliver their message: find the heart stone, or all of Marienburg would suffer the same fate.”

“Find the heart stone? What’s that?” Kurt asked.

Deschamp shook his head. “Nobody knew. Henschmann sent another group of men down, all wearing armour and with enough weapons to start a small war. They all vanished, except one. He crawled back up to the sewers, carrying a scroll, with words on it written in blood. Henschmann never let anyone else read it, but after that we started leaving human sacrifices at the entrance to the catacombs.”

“Like Fingers Blake?”

The prisoner nodded. “Your Black Cap saw me take the body into the sewers, and followed me down to the catacombs. He confronted me as I was leaving. I didn’t have a choice, I had to kill him.”

“Spare us the defence pleas,” Kurt snapped. “Why was Blake chosen as a sacrifice for the ratmen?”

Deschamp shrugged. “I was following orders from Cobbius. He did Henschmann’s dirty work, no questions asked. I was told to search Blake’s body for some brooch before taking him to the catacombs, but I didn’t find anything on his corpse.”

Kurt took a step back, realisation rushing through him. The pieces of the puzzle were coming together at last, but the picture they formed was far more frightening than anything he’d imagined. The murder of Arullen Silvermoon was no longer a simple slaying. There was something far more significant at stake here than his career in the Watch or even the future of Three Penny Bridge station. He wanted to share his suspicions with Belladonna and Jan, but knew he was better to keep those fears to himself for the moment. Both colleagues had noticed his reaction, but were wise enough not to comment on it in front of Deschamp. Instead Jan took charge of the interrogation, while Belladonna observed the prisoner’s reaction to each question, searching for answers beyond his words.

“What do the ratmen want?” Jan demanded. “Where is this stone?”

“I don’t know,” Deschamp insisted. “I’m an errand boy, a hired hand. You want to know more about those creatures, try talking to Abram Cobbius. He’s seen them, I haven’t.”

“When did he see them?”

The prisoner shrugged. “A few weeks ago. They’ve been getting bolder, coming closer and closer to the surface. That’s why I had to drag your watchman’s body up to the street. Henschmann gave orders forbidding the dumping of bodies in the sewers. We still left the human sacrifices down in the catacombs, but nothing more than that. Henschmann didn’t want us feeding the enemy, that’s what Cobbius told me.”

“What do these creatures look like?” Belladonna asked.

“I told you, I don’t know-I haven’t seen them, have I?”

“How do we know you’re telling the truth?”

“Why would I lie?” Deschamp said in a whimper. “I’ll be dead before Geheimnistag.”

“Why are you so certain?”

He looked at her through weeping eyes. “You don’t understand, do you? Henschmann can’t leave Abram Cobbius in your custody, he knows too much. The League will attack this place before nightfall. If they can’t get Abram back, they’ll murder him-or have him murdered. Anybody who gets in their way is as good as dead.” Deschamp turned away. “You’re all dead, but you haven’t realised it yet. I have.”

“How can you be so certain?” Jan snarled.

“At least one of your watchmen is a traitor, if not more of than one. That’s how Henschmann works. He buys the complicity of his enemies. If he can’t bribe those at the top, he’ll subvert those below them and conquer from within. It’s how he took control of the League, how he bought the Stadsraad. It’s the reason he employs Abram Cobbius, as the first step in a campaign to control the guild as well.”

“Next you’ll be telling me he wants to turn the watch into his plaything.”

Deschamp snorted and shook his head. “He already has! Taal’s teeth, it was probably his idea to have this station reopened, part of some greater scheme you can’t grasp. All of you, you’re pawns in his game, to be used and sacrificed as necessary. Henschmann is playing at a level you cannot comprehend, because you’ve no idea what’s at stake. If you did, you wouldn’t be foolish enough to stay here.” He glanced round the room. “This place and everyone in it, you’re all at his mercy, one way or another. Half the watch captains in this city are on Casanova’s payroll and most of the others are being manipulated by him, whether they know it or not. Even your commander isn’t immune from Casanova.”

Jan shook his head, dismissing the prisoner’s claims. “I’ve never heard so much nonsense in my life. Next you’ll be telling me the sky is green and Henschmann can command the moon to do his will!”

“Believe what you like,” Deschamp spat. “I know the truth.” Kurt emerged from his office, followed by Jan and Belladonna. The sergeant went into the kitchen and apologised to Gerta before asking her to deal with Deschamp. She agreed, although her language was less than ladylike when she discovered the rank state of the prisoner. The captain waited until Gerta had taken Deschamp downstairs before talking with Jan and Belladonna. “I think I know why Arullen Silvermoon was down in the catacombs, why he got murdered.”

“He was a sacrifice to the ratmen?” Jan suggested.

“In a way.” The captain started to explain but stopped himself. “In all honesty, it’s better for you both-safer for you-if you don’t know

more. Not yet, anyway."

"You're talking in riddles," Belladonna observed. "It's nearly as bad as a conversation with Otto."

Kurt nodded. "You're right, I need to talk with Otto."

"No, I didn't mean-"

"Can you find him and bring him here?"

"I suppose so," she replied. "When do you-"

"Now," Kurt cut in. "The sooner, the better."

"Fine!" Belladonna stalked off down the stairs, frustration evident on her features.

"Well, you've gotten her out of the way," Jan said, "though it'll take some apology to calm her down later. So, what did you want to tell me you couldn't tell her?"

"Nothing," Kurt replied. "I do need to talk with Otto. That's it."

His sergeant wasn't accepting that. "Something Deschamp said scared you. What was it?"

Kurt rested a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Honestly, it's safer if you don't know."

Jan shook his head. "I told you this place would be the death of one of us."

"I'm still hopeful you're wrong about that."

"Captain!" Raufbold shouted up the stairs. "There's a halfling here to see you!"

Kurt and Jan went down to reception where Silvia Vink was waiting. She was still dressing in mourning black, but she was carrying a white scroll in her tiny hands. "Is it true what people are saying on the street? That you've arrested Abram Cobbius and charged him with my husband's murder?"

"Yes, it's true. He's also facing at least one more count of murder, along with other crimes."

She smiled. "Thank you. I didn't believe you would do it, that anyone would ever do it. To meet a man who keeps his promises in this world is difficult enough, but more so when you're a halfling. Thank you, Captain Schnell, from the bottom of my heart. And my husband thanks you too, wherever he is now."

"You're welcome," Kurt replied, quite moved by the power of her words. He expected Mrs. Vink to leave, but she remained where she was, her hands quaking. "Was there something else?"

The halfling nodded, tears in her eyes. "Knowing what you've done for me, it makes this so much more difficult, but it is the price I had pay to get my husband's fish market back."

"I don't understand…"

She handed the white scroll to him. "They told me to deliver this to you personally. In return I've been given the deeds for the fish

market next door. It'll reopen after Geheimnistag."

"It's wonderful news about the market, but why not reopen sooner?" Kurt had been planning to raid the fishmonger's premises next to the station, having learned what was packed inside the fish, but the market had remained closed all morning. Mrs. Vink was shaking her head.

"I doubt anyone will be crossing Three Penny Bridge today or tomorrow, let alone stopping to buy fish. Not until after-Well, read the message and you'll understand." She pressed a soft, warm palm against Kurt's much larger hands. "Goodbye, Captain Schnell. It was an honour to have known you." With that she hurried out of the station and back across the bridge to her house. The front door slammed behind her, followed by the sound of bolts being rammed home to shut out the world.

"What was all that about?" Raufbold asked in a bemused voice.

"I'm not sure," Kurt admitted. He walked over to the station entrance and looked out. By this time of the day the cobbles of Three Penny Bridge were normally crowded by citizens and merchants, vagrants and visitors, all trying to get from Stoessel to Riddra or vice versa. Instead the span was all but deserted, and those who were using it hurried past, their eyes resolutely looking forwards, none of them daring to glance at the station. Kurt unrolled the scroll and read the message, before passing it to his sergeant without comment. Jan studied the words, his face hardening as they sunk in. "You might as well read that out so everyone can hear it," Kurt urged. "Better they all know now, rather than finding out from gossip and whispers on the streets."

"You're sure?" Jan asked. The captain nodded, so Jan did as he was told. "To the captain and watchmen of Three Penny Bridge station: release Abram Cobbius by sunset or suffer the consequences."

"In other words-surrender or die," Kurt said.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Otto had been praying for guidance when Belladonna came to his temple. For days he had been aware of a darkness lingering at the edges of his thoughts, a malign presence that troubled him beyond words. He had felt this presence before, but never in such strength and never so savage in its hunger. Something bad was coming to Suiddock, something that threatened to destroy much of the district. If Suiddock fell, most of the city would succumb soon after. The district was akin to a heartbeat for Marienburg the pulsing centre of the city's merchant economy. Destroy that and all of Marienburg would suffer-and when Marienburg suffered, so did the rest of the Empire. Otto shuddered, as if the darkness had slouched a step closer. He jumped when a fist banged against the temple door. It was a relief when he saw Belladonna outside.

"The captain wants you," she snapped. Otto opened the door to admit her, but the Black Cap remained outside on the step. "Now." Perplexed by her anger and urgency, the priest pulled on a cloak and slipped the hood over his head before following her to Three Penny Bridge. Black clouds were gathering on the horizon, a dark portent of a coming storm. They arrived to find the station in uproar, the captain shouting at his recruits for silence. The watchmen appeared frightened and the reason became apparent to Otto as soon as he entered the building.

"We have no choice about this," Kurt yelled at his men. "If we cave in to Henschmann's threats, the Watch will be a joke in Suiddock for the rest of our lives-and in many other parts of the city, too."

"I'd rather be a live joke than a dead hero," Faulheit shouted back, several of the others loudly agreeing with him. "You can't expect us to stay here, knowing the League is coming to kill us."

"Henschmann would not dare openly attack a watch station," the captain retorted. "Even if he does, I've already sent a request to every station in the city for reinforcements. We'll be ready for any attack."

"How do you know when the reinforcements will arrive?" Raufbold demanded.

"I don't," Kurt said. "But I don't believe the commander would let us be slaughtered by the League. He knows it would be political suicide for his career -and if there's one thing the commander cares more about, it's his own career!" That brought a murmur of agreement from the Black Caps. Everybody in the city knew the commander's priorities and what Kurt said rang true. "We do have a choice here," he pleaded with his men, "but it isn't an easy one. We can cut and run, be branded as cowards for the rest of our lives. Or we can stand

and fight, proving everybody else wrong in the process. I know I'd rather die fighting for something I believed in, than live as a coward, afraid of my own shadow."

Otto studied the watchmen's face. The tide was turning, but they didn't look convinced yet.

"Even if we run away, Henschmann's thugs can still find us, still have their revenge. Do you honestly believe all this will blow over if we do as he says and slink away, tails between our legs? Or do you think it's more likely he'll have us hunted down and slain, one by one, as an example to the rest of the city? If Henschmann lets us go, he'll lose face-and he never lets anyone who shames him survive long."

Raufbold stepped out from among the other men. "Why not do as he asks, and release Abram Cobbius? Is it worth going to war for one criminal in a district that's teeming with criminals?"

"We could do that," Kurt agreed. He held up a key on a metal chain hung round his neck. "I could take this downstairs and use it to unshackle Cobbius right now. But what would that achieve? How does letting a murderer back on the streets to spare our necks help the citizens of Suiddock? Cobbius deliberately drowned a halfling so he could turn the fish market next door into a drug distribution network. You all saw what happened to Mutig. Cobbius must have tortured him for hours, removing his limbs while Hans-Michael was still alive, making your colleague watch as he was being dismembered. Would you wish that on anyone else? Because that's what you'd be doing by letting Cobbius go. That man deserves to rot for all the sins he's committed, all the laws he's broken. I intend to see he gets a taste of justice-but I have no intention of letting him go. I will never surrender this station, not to Cobbius or Henschmann or any other thug who thinks they can get whatever they want, whenever they want, by killing and lying and stealing and threatening those weaker than them. We don't need to give in to people like that anymore. We have to stand up, we have to set an example. We have to do the right thing-here and now, today and tonight. We have to take a stand. That's our job." The captain took a step towards Raufbold, who backed away from the impassioned, wild-eyed Kurt. "Anybody that's got a problem, come and see me. Otherwise, get back to your jobs. Dismissed!"

The priest studied the watchmen as they drifted away, muttering to each other and nodding seemingly swayed by the power of Kurt's words. "When the gathering had dispersed, Otto approached the captain with Belladonna. You wanted to see me?"

"Yes. Thanks for coming so quickly," Kurt said, his expression softening.

"You can thank Belladonna for that."

The captain nodded his gratitude. "There's something else you

could do," he said to her. "Sergeant Woxholt's in the basement keeping watch over Cobbius. Take Faulheit down there to relieve Jan, then bring the sergeant up to my office." She nodded before turning to go. "Oh, and Belladonna-I'm sorry about being short with you before. If my suspicions are right, Henschmann and his cronies could be the least of our troubles. But I didn't mean to take my worries out on you. I'm sorry."

"Apology accepted," she replied, before hurrying away.

Otto watched her go. "Don't tell me the son of Old Ironbeard is learning the art of diplomacy-"

Kurt grunted. "The only diplomacy my father believes in requires a blade, an arrow or a bolt. Kind words never won many favours in his army or his household." He glanced at the other Black Caps but all were busy with their own concerns. "Come up to my office, I need to show you something." Belladonna came down the stairs with Faulheit behind her, the reluctant watchman complaining bitterly about returning to the station's basement. "I spent half a day down here, listening to dozens of citizens complaining about their neighbours and pretending they knew something about who murdered that elf," he whined. "I don't see why I should have been chosen to play nursemaid for Abram bloody Cobbius. Besides, it'll be high tide soon and the floor down here floods every time that happens."

She was about to suggest where the watchman could stick his complaints but a scent in the air stopped her. Belladonna could taste metal and smelled decay on the breeze. She motioned Faulheit to silence while retrieving the crossbow confiscated from Deschamp. It was slung over her back on a leather strap, along with a fistful of metal bolts in a makeshift cartridge, ready to be slotted into the weapon for quick firing. Belladonna brought the crossbow round to her chest, deftly moving the cartridge into position. Faulheit pulled a heavy club from its place on his right hip, also ready for action but not so eager to race towards it. The duo crept down the remaining stairs and along the narrow corridor that led into the basement. Ahead of them were four empty doorways, each leading to a different room.

Cobbius had been shackled to the wall in a room on the station's south side. It had empty, barred windows close to floor level. When the tide was at its peak, the water in the cut often rose high enough to spill into the basement via these windows, soaking the feet of anyone inside. That made incarceration down there particularly unpleasant, a useful deterrent for any prisoners who objected to being kept in the holding cells on public display. Belladonna edged towards the room where Cobbius was, grateful the tide had not yet reached its apogee for the day. Splashing through ankle-deep water was no way to conceal your presence. She leaned against the wall by the doorway,

the crossbow gripped tightly, mentally preparing to burst into the cell. Faulheit lurked beside her, weighing the club in his hand, taking deep breaths. Belladonna nodded to him before throwing herself into the cell, yelling for everyone inside to freeze. What she saw made her recoil in horror. Otto examined the tiny brooch of silver and jade, admiring the delicately crafted setting and jewels. “Look at the gemstone in the centre of it,” Kurt prompted. He was standing by the window in his office, watching the deserted span of Three Penny Bridge. It was the middle of the day, though the bleak clouds gathering over Marienburg had blotted out the sun. By rights the bridge should be experiencing one of its busiest times of the day. Instead the span outside it resembled a dwarf settlement the morning after Keg End, with barely a soul stirring in any direction. “What does that look like to you?”

The priest frowned. “I am an acolyte of Morr, not a dealer in gems.”

“Look closer,” Kurt urged.

Otto squinted at the stone in the brooch’s centrepiece. It was tiny, little more than a shard. The gemstone itself appeared emerald at first glance, but it was raw and unrefined, making a true assessment of its hue difficult. Gradually, as the priest’s eyes looked deeper into the fragment, his hands started to tremble. “This is… Where did you get this?”

“Gerta the Blurter bought it from Fingers Blake. I’m guessing he found it near the body of Arullen Silvermoon. How the brooch came to be in Silvermoon’s possession, I have little idea. We know he’d been down in the sewers, possibly even the catacombs-maybe he found it there, I don’t know. I believe the monsters that murdered him were looking for that brooch, the power it contains.” Otto put the brooch down on the captain’s desk as if afraid of being infected by it.

“The unpolished gem in the centre is warpstone,” he said, his voice grave. “No mortal can look upon it or possess it for long without surrendering himself to the power of Chaos.”

Kurt pointed at the brooch. “I’ve been carrying that around in my tunic pocket, little realising what it was doing to me. I’m fortunate to have had only a slight exposure, but still it went to work on my mind, pushing me to lash out at anyone and everyone. I’ve felt these self-destructive urges almost since setting foot inside this station and I couldn’t understand why. I believe that brooch is the cause.”

Otto’s brow furrowed. “You said monsters murdered Arullen Silvermoon. What monsters?”

“Ratmen.”

“Morr protect us,” the priest muttered. “You’re certain of this?”

“As certain as I can be,” Kurt replied. “That tiny shard of

warpstone has special significance to them. They have been leaving their lairs in the catacombs to search for it, edging closer and closer to the surface. They have risked discovery and detection in an effort to claim that small fragment held in the centre of that brooch. I suspect it belongs to some larger piece, a block of warpstone that requires the shard to become complete. Perhaps it is a rare kind of warpstone, with a power many times greater than any other warpstone mortal men have encountered. I don't know the truth of the matter, maybe I never will, but I do know this: while that shard of warpstone remains here on Suiddock, we're all in danger."

"Then destroy it."

The captain shook his head. "I wish I could, but I don't believe that's possible. Perhaps it is fate or destiny, but I have been sent to this place and time, to deal with this. It is my duty."

Otto stood up. "If you're right, keeping the brooch here invites the ratmen to attack this place."

"For the moment, they'd have to get in line."

"So what do you intend to do?"

Kurt smiled at the priest. "Funny you should ask me that."

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The hunched figure was holding a blade to the throat of Abram Cobbius. Fortunately, the prisoner was still asleep, otherwise his life could well have been forfeit by this point. Sergeant Woxholt was sprawled on the basement floor, blood oozing from a gash on his forehead. "Drop the knife," Belladonna said, surprised how authoritative her voice sounded. She kept the confiscated crossbow aimed at the intruder's head.

"Tooth and claw, claw and tooth," the figure hissed, a hooded cloak hiding their face from view.

That was what the murdered elf had said to her, Belladonna remembered. She peered at the blade pressing against Cobbius' skin. The tip had been broken off, but she could see the handle bore markings typical of an elf's knife. "You stole that blade from Arullen Silvermoon, didn't you? Didn't you?"

"Gave it to us," the intruder hissed in a sibilant tone. The accent was pure Suiddock, gruffer and less cultured than other Marienburg voices, so the intruder was local. "Gave us his blood, too."

"You stabbed the elf with his own weapon," she realised.

"We had to feed it, to find salvation." The intruder pressed the

blade deeper into Cobbius' neck. "This is the one. He made us tell, he made us say where the little stone was. The House of Silvermoon was my friend, when I was still just a man. Joost…" Belladonna knew it couldn't be long before Cobbius' skin was broken and his life's blood poured out. "We need to feed the big stone again."

"Turn around," Belladonna commanded. "Let me see your face!"

The hunched figure twisted its head to glare at her. The contorted visage was that of a man, but with features so warped and twisted they were all but unrecognisable. Ruptured lips twisted into something resembling a smile, a suppurating black tongue slithering in and out the black, sickly mouth. "Happy now?"

She fought the urge to retch, swallowing back down the bile rising from her gut. Belladonna sensed movement behind her in the hallway. Faulheit was still out there, his presence so far unnoticed by the intruder. "Get help," she hissed out the corner of her mouth. "Get help!"

"What did you say?" the intruder demanded, his voice the snarl of an animal.

"Get help – I can get help for you," Belladonna replied, relieved to hear Faulheit slip away, heading back upstairs. Now all she needed to do was stop this madman killing again. "What's your name?"

"Joost Holismus," the intruder replied, before gesturing around himself. "This was my domain!" Kurt and Otto were descending the stairs as Faulheit came racing up from the basement. The breathless Black Cap gasped out an explanation of what was happening below. The captain and Otto hurried down to the basement, going as quietly as they could. The sound of a man's shouting helped mask their approach, though his ranted words offered little hope of a bloodless resolution. "I ruled this place once! It was mine, my domain, my kingdom. Then I looked deep into the stone and I saw the true way, the true light-the path to Chaos is the path of righteousness!

"I gave in to that, surrendered my soul to its glory-and the Chaos took my face, took my humanity. It shall take yours too, all of you here, if you stay. Let that be a warning!"

"Tell me more about the stone," Belladonna's voice urged, gently coaxing.

"There isn't time anymore-they are coming!"

Kurt and the priest paused, fearful their approach had been detected.

"Who's coming?" Belladonna asked. "Who are 'they'?"

"They are legion, an army, a horde of ravening vermin, coming to feast upon your bodies and your souls. They shall devour you like carrion, sate themselves upon your flesh and blood!"

"You mean-the ratmen?"

A man screamed, his cry like that of a wounded animal, shrieking in horror. “Say not their name out loud, lest you summon them! I have walked in their shadow all these years, eluding them. But they come now and none may hide from their wrath. Your lives are forfeit. But first my blade must drink blood!”

“Joost, no!” By the time the captain and Otto had burst into the cell, Kurt’s predecessor was pinned to the wall by a crossbow bolt, the metal shaft puncturing his abdomen. Black blood wept from the wound onto the floor, and Holismus shrieked in pain, hurling vile abuse at Belladonna. She was crouched on the floor, cradling Jan in her arms, the crossbow discarded to one side. Cobbius remained chained to the wall, unconscious and oblivious, a red line across his neck the only mark of how close he had been to death. “What took you so long?” Belladonna asked with a weary smile.

“You know how it is,” Kurt said, kneeling beside her and Jan. “Paperwork always gets in the way of the real law enforcement. How’s the sergeant?”

“He’ll be fine, nothing fatal,” she replied, before looking to Otto. “You’d best check Holismus, see how bad his wound is. I tried to stop him without killing him, but…”

The priest moved closer to the intruder, but remained outside the reach of Holismus’ flailing arms and legs. “He won’t die today. Chaos has perverted his body so badly it would take much more than a single crossbow bolt to kill him. Consider yourself fortunate the shot pinned him to the wall.”

Jan stirred, wincing in pain as his senses returned. “Sigmar’s sausage, what hit me?”

“Joost Holismus,” Kurt replied, indicating the angry intruder. “Any idea how he got in?”

The sergeant shook his head. “Never heard him coming either.”

“This used to be his station,” Belladonna pointed out. “He probably knows more about it than anyone else alive.”

“Something tells me he’s not in the mood to share,” Kurt observed. “Otto, you should be going.”

“Indeed. I wish you well in the trial to come.” The priest bowed to them before leaving the cell.

“If you see Faulheit upstairs, send him down to me,” the captain called after him.

“You’re letting him leave?” Belladonna asked, her face filled with bewilderment.

“I can’t expect him to stay here, not with what faces us,” Kurt replied.

She hurried out into the corridor and caught hold of Otto as he reached the stairs. “You can’t leave us like this. For the love of Morr,

we need your help here!"

The priest shook his head. "My duty takes me elsewhere."

"So, that's it? You're running back to your precious temple to hide? Everyone in this station could be supping with Morr by nightfall and you're leaving us to that fate!"

"You don't understand. I go in search of help-if there's anyone who can help you." Otto strode up the stairs, ignoring her cries for him to come back. Moments later an apprehensive Faulheit appeared.

"The captain wants to see you," Belladonna said, her voice close to breaking. She listened as Kurt told the watchman to go out and find a witch hunter called Brother Nathaniel.

"He's probably in the nearest Temple of Sigmar, praying up a storm. Tell him we've captured his Chaos-loving heretic. If he wants Joost Holismus, he should come down here. And you might suggest he bring some friends, assuming Nathaniel has any. It'll take at least four to get the madman out of here." Faulheit hurried past Belladonna to the stairs. She returned to the cell, unable to understand Kurt's actions.

"Why hand him over to the witch hunters? He may have useful intelligence about the ratmen."

"Brother Nathaniel made it clear he would destroy this place if I withheld Holismus from him," Kurt replied. "The witch hunters have the power to do that, power unchecked by any authority in this city. If we do get through the next day or two, I'd like this station to have a future. Manann knows, neither the commander nor any members of the Stadsraad are going to stand up to the witch hunters on our behalf."

"Besides," the sergeant added, "I doubt we'll get much sense out of Joost."

Holismus was spitting mouthfuls of black blood at them, snarling and cursing, his eyes rolling back into his head. As he thrashed about, his hood fell backwards, revealing his grey, receding hair. Belladonna approached him carefully, picking up the elf blade from the basement floor. "You stabbed Arullen Silvermoon, didn't you? Why?"

The Chaos-addled creature thrust his forked tongue out at her, flicking it back and forth in a grotesque lapping motion. When she turned away, a quiet, almost childlike voice escaped from him. "He had the heart of the stone, the last shard of it with him. I took his blood and fed it to the stone, as payment."

Joost's younger brother ran into the cell, breathless and wild-eyed. When Lothar saw his sibling, he cried out in anguish, sinking to his knees on the floor. "I told you! I told you I saw him, but none of you would believe me. Why? Why didn't you trust me?"

Kurt rested a comforting hand on the grief-stricken watchman's

shoulder. “I’m sorry, Lothar.”

Joost’s head twitched and spasmed.

“Lothar? Is that you, little brother?”

The other Holismus looked up, amazement on his features. “Joost? You know me?”

“How could I forget my own brother?” Lothar got to his feet, moving closer to the Chaos-stricken creature pinned to the wall. Belladonna put herself between the siblings, to stop Lothar getting too close. “Lothar, I need you to do something for me,” Joost whispered, his voice that of a normal man, not the rasping screech of horror and hatred it had been before.

“Anything, brother,” Lothar promised.

“Kill me before the witch hunters get here.”

Lothar glanced at the captain. “You summoned the witch hunters for him?”

“I had no choice,” Kurt admitted. “I’m sorry.”

“They’ll torture me and torment me, all in the name of their god,” Joost continued, his voice becoming a scratchy, vile hiss of venom once more. “They seek glory for their god by vanquishing Chaos, Lothar! You must stop them, you must strike them down. Kill them for me, boy!”

The younger Holismus staggered back from his brother, horrified by the twisted personality fighting its way to the surface of Joost’s consciousness. “No. I can’t do that-I’m sorry.”

“You’re weak! You were always weak, the baby of the family! No use to anyone for anything!”

Lothar clamped both hands over his ears, trying to block out the taunting, insistent voice. “No!”

“You’ll die in this place. They’re coming for you. They’re going to feast on your soul, Lothar!”

“No!” The watchman collapsed to the stone floor, eyes rolling back into his head. Kurt moved to him, checking Lothar was not badly hurt.

“He’s fainted, that’s all,” the captain said. “Probably just as well.” Heavy footfalls came down into the basement from the staircase. Kurt got to his feet and strode to Joost, jamming a forearm against the Chaos convert’s throat so Joost’s head slammed into the wall. “How long have we got, Captain Holismus? How long until the ratmen come?”

“You’ll all be dead before you see another dawn,” Joost replied, his voice normal again for a moment, his eyes a pale blue instead of black, tormented slithers of darkness. Then Chaos took hold of him once more and he resumed spitting abuse at the watchmen, goading them with threats of doom. Joost tried to bite off Kurt’s fingers when

the captain clamped a hand over Joost's mouth to stem the abuse.

The former captain of Three Penny Bridge choked, green bile oozing out between Kurt's fingers.

"Step away from that monstrosity!" a stern voice commanded. Belladonna was shoved aside by five witch hunters, dark cloaks swirling around them as they stormed into the cell. She was about to protest but a menacing glare from their leader silenced her. "My name is Brother Nathaniel of the Temple Court and I hereby claim the prisoner Joost Holismus. You will surrender him into my custody."

Kurt stepped away from the wall, letting the Chaos creature free to fight anyone who came near it. Several of the witch hunters took blows to their bodies and faces as they sought to subdue Joost. Through it all he kept ranting and hissing at them. "Even if you carry me away, I shall return! I will rise up, with an army of followers to reclaim this unholy place in the future! Mark my words, you fools, mark my words!"

Once the prisoner was unconscious, Brother Nathaniel stepped forward and ripped the bolt from Joost's body with needless savagery. The witch hunter's eyes gleamed at his triumph. "I have waited a long time to take this sinner into custody," he crowed. "Today is a good day for the Temple Court!"

"You're welcome," Kurt said wryly.

The witch hunters glared at him until Brother Nathaniel gave a signal for them to remove Joost. "Don't think this has removed you from my suspicions, Captain Schnell," he said as the other four carried Kurt's predecessor away. "All you've done is earn this station a reprieve. My brethren and I will be keeping a close watch on this place, waiting for the next taint of Chaos to become apparent-and it shall."

"Good to know we've got someone looking after us, isn't it?" Kurt said to Jan and Belladonna.

"What a friend we have in Brother Nathaniel," the sergeant agreed.

The witch hunter noticed Joost's brother on the floor. "I'd watch that one, if I were you. All too often the Chaos infection spreads along the bloodline. Once one sibling goes, the others often follow."

"You got what you wanted," Kurt sighed. "Shove off."

Scowling even more than usual, Brother Nathaniel strode from the cell.

Kurt looked down at Jan on the floor. "I suppose you're going to complain I should have been nicer to him. Making friends and influencing people, all that dung you always preach."

The sergeant stood up, one hand rubbing his forehead. "Those kind of friends we can live without."

“Maybe, but we still need allies if we’re going to outlive Joost’s predictions,” Belladonna observed. “You told the rest of the station we could expect reinforcements. When are they getting here?” She watched as the two men exchanged a look. “There are no reinforcements coming, are there?”

“Not from other watch stations, no,” Kurt confessed.

“From anywhere?”

He shrugged. “Otto seemed to think he might have better luck.”

“Seemed to think?” she asked, disbelief all too evident in her voice. “Might have better luck? That’s what you’re pinning all our hopes on now?”

Kurt folded his arms. “Well, what do you expect me to say? We’ve got nine Black Caps in this station, a handful of weapons for each of them and a building that’s seen better days. So, no, I don’t think much of our chances, but I’ve been in worse fights and I’m still alive. Sometimes you’ve got to believe in yourself-especially when you’ve got nothing else left to believe in. Is that good enough for you?”

Belladonna let out a long breath of exasperation. “Well, I guess it’ll have to do, won’t it?”

“Maybe not,” the captain replied before striding from the cell. “Somebody take care of Lothar!”

“Where are you going?” Jan called after him. A low rumble of thunder echoed in the background, as the coming storm fought its way in from the ocean.

“Don’t let anybody leave until I get back!” “You’ve taken my cousin Abram into custody?” Lea-Jan Cobbius had to admire his visitor’s pluck. Few watch captains dared seek an audience with the master of the Stevedores’ and Teamsters’ Guild, and fewer still started such an audience by announcing they had arrested a member of the Cobbius family.

In fact, Kurt Schnell was definitely the first and almost certainly the last. “May I ask on what charges?”

“Two counts of murder, plus extortion and torture. There may be more.”

“I see.” Lea-Jan rested both elbows on his desk, forming his fingers into a steeple. “Well, I was wondering where he had disappeared to. Abram attacked one of my men early this morning and vanished not long afterwards. A drunken brawl, I imagine. He does have rather a bad temper.”

“So I’ve noticed.”

“Indeed. And is that why you’ve come here-to inform me of his arrest?”

“I have a witness who says Abram’s a lieutenant for Adalbert Henschmann, as well as being a member of your guild. I felt it my

duty to inform you of this lapse in judgement by one of your members."

"Did you?"

"It seemed only proper. The guild is an honoured and much valued part of this district, and naturally you wouldn't wish to see its reputation tarnished by the actions of a maverick element."

"Naturally," Lea-Jan agreed, nodding sagely. Plainly, Schnell was no fool, even if the captain was playing a dangerous game. "Well, what do you suggest my membership do about all this?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

The captain leaned forward on to Lea-Jan's desk and stared into his host's steely eyes. "Do nothing. Let what is about to happen take its course. Should others decide they wish to release your cousin, for whatever reasons of their own, it will trigger bloodshed on Three Penny Bridge. I've no wish to see the innocent members of the guild dragged into such a needless and doomed conflict."

"An interesting notion."

"Once matters have run their course, the guild will have won the respect of whoever emerges the victor. But whoever wins, both sides in the conflict will have been significantly weakened. All of this you and your members can achieve by doing nothing, by remaining neutral." Schnell stood upright again, his hands on his hips. "What could be easier?"

Lea-Jan's eyes narrowed. "Very well, Captain Schnell. The guild shall merely observe events." He stood and offered the hand of friendship to the Black Cap. "I hope you have success in the coming hours. It would be a shame for the district to lose a man such as yourself so soon. I believe we could forge a fruitful working relationship in the future."

His visitor smiled as he accepted the hand. "Thanks, but I'll worry about the future tomorrow."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Molly was collecting her meagre possessions when Captain Schnell appeared in the bordello entrance, silhouetted against the queasy yellow light outside. A storm was gathering over Suiddock, the black clouds threatening to turn late afternoon into an early twilight. “I was wondering when you’d get here,” she said. “If you’re planning to enjoy the company of my girls before Casanova has you and all your watchmen killed, you’re too late. I’ve already relocated them to the far end on Luydenhoek until all this blows over.”

“Good, I’m glad to hear it,” he replied. “Three Penny Bridge will be a war zone come sundown and I don’t want any innocent people getting hurt in the crossfire.”

“Well, my girls and I have been called a lot of names in our times, but I can’t say innocent is one of them. Still, thanks for the thought.” Molly stopped packing and looked round the bordello that only days earlier had been an abandoned temple. “It’s a shame, I liked this place.”

“It’s a good location,” her visitor agreed.

“All the passing trade we could ever want.”

“Watchmen right next door in case a customer starts causing trouble.”

“Not to mention a few of your recruits that aren’t averse to being customers themselves-not that I’m naming any names, mind.” She sighed. “Yes, this would have been a good home for me and my girls.”

“It still can be, when this is over.”

Molly stared at him, a smile curling about her ruby red lips. “You believe that, don’t you?”

“Let’s say I’m an optimist.”

“Why? Way I see things, you’re neck deep in a hole and the tide’s coming in.”

The captain shrugged. “When you’ve lost everything you ever loved, ever cared about-when you’ve got nothing left to lose-then the only way is up.”

“You can still lose your life. You remember that, when the time comes.” She started past him, towards the door, but he caught her arm in his grasp. “You planning on starting something with me?”

“Stay. I’ve seen the way you handle yourself when trouble arrives.”

“My girls need me,” Molly insisted.

“We need you,” the captain replied. His hand cupped the side of her face tenderly. “Please.”

She was tempted. The look in his eyes, it was hard to resist. But

resist she did. “You could charm the gulls out of the sky, Captain Schnell. But I plan on being alive this time tomorrow.”

“So do I,” he replied. “Still, I had to ask. You understand, don’t you?”

Molly nodded and smiled. “You got all the weapons you need?”

“We could always use more.”

“That’s what I thought. There’s a brace of pistols strapped to the underside of my bed, I keep them there in case any of my girls has problems with a customer. You’ll only get two shots from each of them, but it’s better than nothing. Oh, and there’s a locked chest at the back. You might find a few useful things in it.” The captain raised an eyebrow at her. “You’d be amazed what some men leave behind in here.”

“I don’t doubt it,” the captain said.

“Well, if you can prise the chest open, what’s inside is yours.”

“Thanks. I’ll get my men to bring it round.”

“Don’t bother, just use the adjoining doorway,” Molly realised he was staring at her. “You did realise there’s a hidden passage between this place and your station, didn’t you?”

“No, but that might explain where Bescheiden keeps disappearing to.”

“Dirty little sod’s in here twice a day, you know. Where he gets the money for it, I’ve no idea,” she commented. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got to see how my girls are getting on.” Lightning suddenly cracked through the air, the flash of white light starkly revealing the fear in Molly’s eyes.

Moments later came the boom of the thunder, rumbling on and on, echoing back and forth along the narrow alleys and passageways. “I need to get going, before the rain starts. You can catch your death if you get caught outside when the storm hits.” The captain removed his hand and stepped out of Molly’s way. She smiled and gave him a kiss on the cheek. “That’s for luck. If half of what I’ve heard is true, you’ll need it.” Kurt ran back into the station as the second flash of lightning illuminated the rapidly darkening bridge. The thunder came a moment after, the boom a deafening roar of sound and fury that went on and on and on. As the last echoes died away, Kurt heard a match being lit. The station’s interior was near to darkness, so dense had the storm clouds overhead become. A yellow flame flickered into life as Jan lit an oil lamp and several of the other watchmen followed his example.

Once all the lamps were lit, Kurt looked round the expectant, frightened faces of his recruits. Narbig lurked at the back in the shadows, alone and taciturn as always. Scheusal stood near the sergeant, the two of them not unlike each other in looks and stature.

Belladonna and Gerta were together, the Black Cap comforting the tearful cook. Holismus was kneeling on the floor, rocking back and forth, muttering to himself. Faulheit held up a lamp to light the room, as did Bescheiden and Raufbold. In the holding cells were nearly a dozen men and three women, all of them awaiting transportation to Rijker's for various crimes and misdemeanours. Not much to defend a three-storey building, Kurt thought. Not much hope to be had here.

"We don't have long," he said. "This storm might be to our advantage, once the rains come. They'll make life much harder for Henschmann's thugs if they do decide to come in here and take Cobbius. They won't be able to burn us out and they'll soon get cold, standing in the rain. That's the good news. The bad news is our reinforcements won't be here before the deadline. For now, we're on our own."

Jan stepped forward, his face resolute and determined as always. "We're with you, captain."

Kurt let his gaze take in all the Black Caps, seeing those who had courage in their eyes and those who had only fear for company. He dug into his waist belt and retrieved the two pistols gifted to him by Molly. "Alright, here's what we're going to do. Narbig, I want you up on the first floor with Belladonna and Gerta. That's your position and you'll hold it, no matter what. We're lucky the fish market and the abandoned temple are both single storey structures, so the only two points of access you'll have to defend are the two staircases. It's unlikely but possible the enemy might try to climb the sides of the station, so be aware of that threat and stand ready to repel any such attempts. Your main job will be to use the upper levels' height advantage to fire down at any attackers you see. Understand?" Narbig nodded his agreement. Gerta held up a hand. "Yes, what is it?"

"I could boil some soup," she said, "and pour it over anybody who tries to climb the station walls."

Kurt couldn't help but smile at her suggestion. "You do that. But save some soup for the rest of us. We could be defending this position for hours and everyone will need hot food to keep them going." He looked to Belladonna but she made no comment and passed no judgement on her assigned position.

Jan stepped forward. "Where do you want me, captain?"

"The basement, I'm afraid. If my predecessor can find a way of infiltrating the station down there, we need to discover it and seal that off. Bescheiden, Raufbold and Faulheit will help you stand guard over Cobbius. The tide is rising and it looks like being a bad one, driven in hard from the sea by this storm, so you can expect things to get wet and wild down there. Hold on as best you can. If it gets too much, pull back to this level and we'll block the staircases-but that's a last resort.

If we have to abandon the station, our best hope of getting out is via the basement. From there we can swim to safety, if necessary."

"Where do you want Lothar and me?" Scheusal asked.

"You'll be with me on this level," Kurt replied. "We are going to block all the windows and barricade the doors, to secure the station from ground attacks. Everyone assigned to the basement will help with that for now. Those on the top floor can act as our eyes and ears until sunset."

"You can't leave us in here," one of the prisoners called out. "We aren't part of your fight."

"Once the briefing is done, Sergeant Woxholt will let you go," Kurt replied. "But there will be a record of your names, addresses and crimes sent to the nearest station, so don't think of this as a reprieve. Consider it a respite." Kurt turned to his former mentor. "What weapons have we got?"

"The clubs and jacks issued to all watchmen, obviously-but they're only good for close quarters combat. We confiscated plenty of daggers, short swords and the like when we reclaimed the station."

"That's a start," Kurt said. "Go next door to Molly's place and you'll find a chest near the back of the building. I've had a look inside and it's loaded with crossbows, bolts, bows and arrows. Bring them into the station and divide the spoils evenly. Bescheiden can show you a secret passage that leads next door. Once you've got the chest in here, better barricade the passageway. We don't want any unpleasant surprises once the fun starts. Right, any more questions?" He waited, but nobody spoke. "Good. You've all got your assignments, so get to them!" The Black Caps started to move, but Kurt halted them with a shout. "And hey! Let's be careful in here. We watch each other's backs and we can get through this-together!"

A bolt of lightning stabbed down into the cobbles in front of the station, followed by a boom of thunder a split-second later. Everybody froze, transfixed by the spectacle outside. As the thunder died away, the rain began, lashing down on Suiddock. The storm had arrived, hitting the district with a vengeance. Kurt stamped his right boot down on the wooden floor with an almighty thud. "Move, people-move!"

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Abram Cobbius woke with a start when somebody threw a bucket of seawater over him. He gasped and spluttered, his skin shocked by

the coldness of the liquid and his eyes smarting at its saltiness. He tried to wipe his face dry but found his arms were immobile, chained by his side. Cobbius blinked and shook his head, trying to see what in the name of Sigmar was going on. Another bucket of seawater hit him full in the face, and he swallowed a mouthful, coughing and choking on the acrid taste. “Who dares? Tell me your name and I swear you’ll spend the rest of your days regretting-”

A third bucket of seawater splashed into his face, silencing the rest of his threat. When Cobbius recovered and the last of the liquid had drained from his eyes, he was finally able to see who was dowsing him. “You!” he snarled.

Facing him was Schnell, the watch captain who had broken his nose a few days ago. The Black Cap was standing in the middle of a cold, damp stone chamber, surrounded by wooden buckets, most of them filled with seawater. Beside him was a big, blond, bearded and burly Black Cap, bearing the insignia of a sergeant on his uniform. He was holding another bucket of seawater, ready to throw it.

Cobbius craned his head round, trying to get a better idea of where he was. The sound of lapping water was near, so he must be close to one of the cuts or canals, probably in a basement or the lower level of a building. He was shackled to a wall with chains, and he-

“You arrested me?”

“Bravo!” Schnell replied, applauding the deduction with a mocking handclap.

“My cousin will have your guts for this!”

“Your cousin has disowned you, Abram. I went to see him a while ago. Apparently you were warned you would be on your own the moment you walked out of the guild’s headquarters. You staggered out of there not long before dawn this morning and that’s when we arrested you.”

“Liar!” Cobbius snarled and got another dowsing.

“Name calling won’t get you anywhere,” the captain replied. “Your employer, the dishonourable Adalbert Henschmann, seems to think you’re worth a lot of effort to get back. Why is that, Abram?”

“I’ll never tell you!” The sergeant threw a fresh bucketful into Cobbius’ face.

“We can keep this up all night if we have to,” Schnell said, no trace of emotion in his voice. “Why are you so important to Casanova, hmm? What knowledge do you have that he’s afraid of?”

Cobbius made several obscene suggestions about what the two Black Caps could do to each other and got two buckets of seawater in the face. “You kiss your mother with that mouth?” the sergeant asked.

“No, I kiss your mother with it-and not on the mouth, either!” Cobbius retorted.

The captain waited until after the next dowsing before resuming his interrogation. “Tell me what you know about the ratmen.” Cobbius flinched at the name, unable to stop himself.

“Never heard of them,” he lied.

“Everybody’s heard of the ratmen,” the captain said. “But most people think they are a myth, a legend. I doubt there’s one in ten people alive in Marienburg who believe in the ratmen. I doubt there’s one in a thousand who’s ever seen these monsters-but you have.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Cobbius maintained.

“You’ve met with them, haven’t you? You’re the one who organised the human sacrifices, hoping it would satisfy them. You’re the one who’s been doing their dirty work, as well as Casanova’s, aren’t you? The ratmen told you about a fragment of warpstone they craved, they sent you to find it. Nobody realised how ambitious you were, did they? Nobody grasped how far you would go to prove yourself, how much you’re willing to sacrifice to become more important, more powerful than your cousin Lea-Jan. It’s all down to you, isn’t it, Abram?”

“You can’t prove I’m responsible for any of that,” Cobbius sneered.

“I don’t need to prove anything. I just wanted to hear you deny it,” Schnell replied.

Cobbius spat at the captain and got a fresh bucket of seawater in the face as his reward. The sergeant was ready to fling another at the prisoner but Schnell stopped him. “Enough, Jan. Henschmann doesn’t want the rest of the city to know he made a pact with the ratmen. If word got out, it would destroy him. That’s why he needs to stop our friend here from talking-to us, to anyone.” The captain looked at Cobbius and shook his head. “You want the bad news, Abram? If we lose this battle, Henschmann is going to have you murdered. He’ll probably feed your body to the ratmen as his own kind of poetic justice. If we win through, Manann knows how, you’ll go to Rijker’s and Henschmann will have you killed there instead. Either way, I don’t rate your chances of seeing Geheimnistag.”

As the captain finished talking, the first wave of sea-water spilled in through the empty, barred windows that looked out on the cut. The rising tide had reached the floor of the dungeon and flooding was about to begin. “How high does the water normally get down here?” Schnell asked his sergeant.

“I heard it was waist high once, but that was exceptional. Don’t worry, we’ll be fine down here.”

Schnell shook his sergeant’s hand. “Remember what I said, Jan. If the flooding gets too bad, pull back to the ground floor and we’ll defend the staircases as best we can.”

The sergeant saluted him. “Good luck, Kurt.”

“Good luck, old friend. I’ll see you when this is over, one way or another.” The captain strode from the chamber, leaving Cobbius alone with his sergeant.

“What about me?” the prisoner shouted. “What happens if the flood tide gets too high for me?”

“You’ll probably drown,” the sergeant smiled at him. “Act accordingly.” Kurt had left orders for the station entrance to remain open as long as possible. All the ground floor windows were boarded up, while most of the upper level windows were barricaded from the inside. Outside the rainstorm continued to lash Three Penny Bridge, driving any last, lingering bystanders away. When the captain came up from the basement, he found Scheusal and Holismus waiting for him. Lothar had recovered from the shock of seeing his brother dragged away by the witch hunters, but his hands were still trembling. Kurt looked at his own palms and realised they, too, were shaking. Not much of a surprise there. “Should we barricade the entrance?” Scheusal asked, saluting briskly.

“Not yet,” Kurt replied. “I imagine our friends in the League will want to give us one last chance to cave in before they attack. Brinksmanship has certain traditions, I find.”

“Schnell!” A stern voice bellowed from outside. “We want to talk.”

“Right on time,” the captain smiled, moving over to the entrance. He looked out across Three Penny Bridge, squinting to see through the torrential downpour. Dozens of men were waiting on the other side, sheltering from the rain in the shadow of the homes opposite the station. A heavyset, hatchet-faced man marched into the centre of the span and stood, waiting for a reply. Kurt peered at his face. The beard was new, as was the eye-patch, but the personality was unmistakable. “Gunther Gross.”

“The mercenary?” Scheusal asked. “What’s he doing here?”

“Henschmann only hires the best-the most vicious, the most brutal, the most successful of thugs. Gross was Marienburg’s deadliest mercenary until he lost his eye in a fight and get sent to Rijker’s.”

“Who sent him there?”

“The same person that took his eye,” Kurt replied. “Me.”

“Schnell!” the mercenary raged outside in the rain. “Come out and face me, coward!”

The captain moved to go out but Holismus stopped him. “They’ll kill you if you do!”

“Not yet. We have to parley first. Then they’ll try to kill me.”

“You can’t be sure of that,” the watchman insisted.

“I told you, brinksmanship has its traditions-this is one of them.

Get the barricade for this door ready. When I come back, we'll be lucky to have a few moments before they attack, probably less." Holismus stepped aside to help Scheusal prepare the last barricade, built from the former tavern's tables and chairs. The two men could shove it into place within moments. The captain took a deep breath and marched out into the rainstorm, one hand behind his back, one finger of that hand clasped around the trigger of a pistol shoved into his waist belt. Kurt stopped a pace shy of Gross and the two men regarded each other, not bothering to conceal their hatred. "How's the eye, Gunther?"

"It hurts when rain comes and it hurts when I'm cold," the mercenary snarled.

"You must be loving this weather then."

"Spare me your attempts at wit, coward!"

Kurt laughed. "Straight to business, as usual. You should learn to appreciate life more, Gunther-you never know when it's going to end, especially in your line of business." He stroked his chin. "Funny thing is, I thought I sent you to Rijker's for life. Until you rot, I believe that was the sentence you got."

"I got out early," Gross replied. "My reward for good behaviour."

"No prizes for guessing who arranged your reward, hmm?"

"Where's Abram Cobbius?"

"In a safe place."

"Send him out. Now. Dead or alive, my employer doesn't mind."

"I'll bet he doesn't. Sigmar forbid anybody should find out what Casanova's been using him for."

"I couldn't care less about that. Send out Cobbius or die. That's as simple as it gets."

Kurt looked past Gross at the other mercenaries lurking on the bridge. "How many men have you brought? Twenty? Thirty? I almost feel insulted. You'll need more than that, you know."

"This lot? They're the welcoming committee. Most of my troops are waiting over there, on Stoessel." Kurt looked to his right and saw another thirty men standing in the rain, murder in their eyes. "Oh, and there's more over there, on Riddra." The captain twisted round and witnessed the truth of what was being said. At least thirty more mercenaries were at the other end of the bridge, swords and axes clutched in their hands, hatred etched into their faces. Gross smiled. "I wouldn't want to insult you."

"Perish the thought," Kurt agreed. "Where'd you find them all?"

"The war against Chaos might have hurt the fresh meat trade, but it's left Marienburg awash in deserters and ex-soldiers, all looking for gainful employment."

"Mercenary scum, in other words-just like you."

Gross' expression soured. "There's no need for name-calling. We're just making a living."

"By killing my Black Caps."

"One man's living is another man's death."

"Then you won't be disappointed to hear we've decided not to hand over Cobbius," Kurt replied.

"Suits me."

"Wouldn't want you to have made all this effort for nothing."

"Very considerate."

"That's what I thought." In a flash Kurt had shoved the end of his pistol into the mercenary leader's good eye. "Now, Gunther, you're going to help me get back inside my station in one piece. Tell your men to hold their fire, or else I'll make sure you never see anything again."

"Curse you, Schnell!"

"Is that your final answer?"

"Kill him!" Gross bellowed to his men.

"Have it your own way," Kurt sighed. He pulled the trigger but the pistol misfired, disabled by the torrential downpour. Kurt grabbed Gross round the throat and twisted him round, turning the mercenary into a human shield. The captain walked backwards towards the station, while his prisoner kept shouting at the other mercenaries to fire. "How sweet," Kurt hissed. "I don't think they want to hurt you."

"Open fire! Now!" Gross shouted. His men did as they were told, but Kurt had already ducked down and taken cover behind his prisoner. The human shield jerked and twitched as shot peppered his body. Kurt increased the speed of his retreat, still using Gross as a barrier. Finally, when the captain was close enough to the station entrance, he shoved Gross back into the street and dived to safety.

The moment Kurt was inside, Scheusal and Holismus rammed the barricade into position. Kurt joined them, holding it in place while they used hammers and nails to secure the barrier, completely blocking the entrance. "Well, at least now they can't get in," the captain said when the job was done.

"And we can't get out!" Scheusal replied, shaking his head.

"Details, details," Kurt said, examining his pistol. "Ahh, the rain must have soaked my gunpowder-no wonder it wouldn't fire. Probably just as well. I'll have to reload it for later."

"Now what do we do?" Holismus asked. "When will they attack?"

The captain held up a hand for silence. He was answered by the roars of an angry mob outside the station, as a hundred men raced at the building intent on penetrating it. "Right about now." Narbig claimed first blood, firing a crossbow down into the rampaging horde of mercenaries from his vantage point in the captain's office. The

street below was choked with targets, all of them trying to batter their way into the station. “Like shooting fish in a barrel,” he snorted, loading a fresh cartridge of bolts into his weapon. Deschamp was still chained to the captain’s desk, now pushed into a corner away from the window. He’d been offered the chance to leave but opted to stay.

“Give me a crossbow, I can help you,” the prisoner said.

“Your kind of help we can do without,” Narbig snarled at him between shots. “You murdered Verletzung. He was the closest thing I had to a friend in this place. Remember that.”

Belladonna came in, also wielding a crossbow. “I need bolts, I’m almost out already,” she said. Narbig gestured to a pile in the corner. Belladonna grabbed two armfuls. “Is Didier giving you trouble?”

“Nothing I can’t handle,” Narbig said, never taking his eyes off the mass of mercenaries below.

Belladonna went into the kitchen to see how Gerta was coping. The station’s cook was preparing a huge cauldron of soup, tears streaming down her face. “Are you alright?”

“Onions,” Gerta gasped, nodding towards a freshly chopped pile. “They always make me cry.”

“Let’s hope that’s all we have to cry about,” Belladonna said. She realised the other woman was looking over her shoulder, wide-eyed and terrified. Belladonna twisted round in time to see two men in the mess room and a third climbing in through the window. She shot the first mercenary with her crossbow, but was too hasty when slotting a second cartridge of bolts into place and the mechanism jammed. “Damn it!” Belladonna bashed the crossbow’s stock on the floor, trying to jar the cartridge free.

By now the intruders were running towards her, daggers in their hands and bloodlust in their eyes. One of them stopped dead as a carving knife buried itself in his throat. Belladonna looked up to see Gerta standing over her, the cook’s face filled with amazement at her own reflex action. But the third intruder was still coming, undeterred by the sudden deaths of his brethren. Belladonna gave up on trying to fix her crossbow and used it as a bludgeon instead, smacking the stock hard into the mercenary’s face as he dived at her. His head snapped sideways, bones inside the neck breaking like dry twigs in a forest. His momentum carried him into Belladonna, pinning her to the ground, but the intruder’s daggers stabbed the wooden floor instead of their intended target.

Gerta pulled the dead man’s body to one side, desperate to make sure Belladonna was unhurt. “I’m fine, I’m fine,” she insisted, scrambling back to her feet. “But we need to do something about those windows.” Belladonna pointed into the mess, where another mercenary was already climbing inside. Hitting the last man had

dislodged the cartridge. Belladonna took her time slotting it back into place, before calmly despatching the killer as he crossed the hallway. She slew two more before reaching the window. A longboat was below in the cut, close to a dozen men still inside it. They had thrown a grappling hook in the window and were using it to clamber up the station's south side. "Oh no you don't!" Belladonna snapped.

She fired a bolt directly into the face of the nearest climber as he looked up at her in surprise. He tumbled back into the water, falling end over end. Belladonna calmly shot two more men, before taking aim at the long boat. Five bolts stabbed through the wooden craft in quick succession, puncturing its hull. By the time she'd finished reloading her crossbow, the longboat was sinking and its cargo of mercenaries was either swimming to safety or drowning. Belladonna staggered back from the window, and dropped the crossbow on the floor, her hands shaking too much to keep a good grip. Gerta hurried across to see if Belladonna was hurt, pausing only to retrieve her carving knife. "What is it? What's wrong, dear?"

"I killed a man," Belladonna gasped.

Gerta looked out the window and tutted. "I think you killed several men."

"I've never killed anyone before in my life," the young woman said, before retching overtook her.

"There, there," Gerta said soothingly, holding Belladonna's hair out of the way. "You didn't have a choice. They were going to kill us, all of us. You did what you had to do."

Belladonna shook her head. "That doesn't make it right," she winced.

"Would you rather like you were dead and they were going downstairs to finish the job, to kill Captain Schnell and the others?" Gerta asked.

"No, but-"

"You did your duty. Now, wipe your mouth and reload your crossbow, dear. I think you'll have a lot more duty to do before this is over, yes?" Belladonna nodded. "That's better. First things first, let's stop any more of them climbing up this rope." Gerta stabbed her carving knife through the rope tied to the grappling hook. Moments later several loud, satisfying splashes sounded in the cut.

Belladonna got back to her feet, retrieving the crossbow. "You get back to your cooking," she told Gerta. "I'll watch over the windows on this side of the building, make sure nobody else comes in this way." In the basement Jan had watched with amusement as the mercenaries' longboat went down. But his smile faded when the first intruder appeared in the hallway, carrying a short sword in one hand and a dagger in the other. The sergeant reacted faster, throwing his own

dagger. It stabbed deep into the mercenary's chest, sending him staggering backwards into another intruder. "Sweet Shallya," Jan gasped. "Where are they coming from?" He and the other watchmen assigned to the basement had scoured it thoroughly but couldn't find the hidden entrance Joost Holismus had used to get into the station earlier. Now Henschmann's thugs had also found a way to gain access to the basement. Jan ran towards the second mercenary, intent on dealing with the immediate threat before resuming the search. He lashed out at the retreating intruder with a sword, slicing off the man's left hand and part of his right cheek. The mercenary went down shrieking for mercy, trying to defend himself with a bloody stump still squirting crimson into the air. Jan ignored the cries for mercy and drove his sword through the intruder's neck.

"Black Caps! To me!" the sergeant bellowed. Faulheit and Bescheiden appeared from the cell where Cobbius was chained to the wall, each of them armed with a crossbow.

"Taal's teeth, where did they come from?" Faulheit gasped, staring in disbelief at the dead men.

"That's what I want to know," the sergeant growled. "Raufbold! Raufbold, where are you?" he shouted, but there was no reply. The incoming water was now ankle deep on the floor and rising fast. Jan jabbed a finger at Faulheit. "You-stay with the prisoner! Bescheiden, you're with me."

Faulheit retreated back into the cell with Cobbius, while Bescheiden helped the sergeant to his feet. "Do you think the mercenaries got Jorg?" the watchman asked.

"Let's hope not," Jan replied. The pair edged along the hallway, looking for any sign of their missing colleague. Jan knew the concealed entrance couldn't be in either of the rooms on the south side of the station-he had been in one when the mercenaries appeared in the hallway, while Bescheiden and Faulheit were in the other with Cobbius. That left the two cells on the north side. Neither had any windows for illumination, so they had served as storage space for ale barrels when the building was still a tavern. They were a step higher than the rest of the basement, so the rising tide hadn't reached them yet. Jan had put lanterns in both chambers, knowing nightfall would only make things more difficult in the basement, especially with high tide due after dark. In one of the north side rooms all the lanterns were still burning, revealing nothing untoward. But the other chamber was black as night, except from a slither of light spilling out of the far corner.

Jan motioned for Bescheiden to stay put while he edged into the room, a blade in both hands. The sergeant crept across the empty chamber, grateful its floor was still dry. As he neared the far corner,

he could heard anxious whispers. The voices were those of Raufbold and someone else, with an unfamiliar accent. Jan stopped, concentrating on listening to the faintly audible words, “Tell Helga I did as she asked, but this is going too far,” the watchman was saying. “I won’t kill for her!”

“Why not? You murdered that crimson shade dealer, Roos.”

“I was desperate!”

“Deny us and you’ll discover the true meaning of desperation, Raufbold.”

Motioning for Bescheiden to stay where he was, Jan moved closer to the wall from where the hushed words were loudest. The sergeant’s right foot stubbed against a slab of stone protruding from the wall. No, it wasn’t a slab-it was a door, standing fractionally ajar. Jan ran his rough hands across the stone and found a concealed mechanism, all but flush to the surface. Little wonder their search had not found the door. He pulled it open a fraction more, moving closer to hear what was being said beyond it.

“I let your mercenaries in to finish off Cobbius,” Raufbold bleated. “Once they’re done, this will all be over, right?”

“It’s not enough anymore,” the other man replied. “Henschmann wants an example made of the station. Your captain has openly defied and embarrassed the League. He has to be executed, along with any of the other Black Caps still loyal to him. Once that’s happened, this will be over-but not before.”

“They’re all loyal to him!” Raufbold hissed.

“Then they must all die. Tonight. Now.”

“You can’t do this!”

“I’m not going to-you are. You and your fellow traveller.”

“What?” Raufbold gasped.

“Our master requires a show of loyalty. You must atone for past failings, Raufbold. Murder your colleagues, or I will slay you, here and now. I don’t care which course you choose-we have another already inside the station to do our bidding, if needs be. Well, what path do you take?”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Jan twisted round to look at Bescheiden. The Black Cap was standing in the doorway, his crossbow aimed at the sergeant's head, ready to fire. Jan waved for Bescheiden to throw him the weapon. The other man blinked, his finger twitching around the trigger. Jan strode across to him and tore the crossbow from Bescheiden's grasp, before returning to the hidden door. The sergeant pulled it open and discovered a long, narrow, candlelit tunnel beyond. Two men were standing in the tunnel, their backs to Jan. Raufbold whirled about, startled at being discovered. Beside him was a sour-faced mercenary aiming a pistol at Raufbold, a second pistol in his other hand.

"Sergeant!" the Black Cap exclaimed. "I've found where the intruders-"

The mercenary shot Raufbold in the chest before he could finish lying. Jan fired his crossbow in the same instant, the bolt thudding deep into the mercenary's skull, sending the intruder flying backwards. When his target had stopped twitching, Jan approached Raufbold. The watchman was collapsed against the tunnel wall, a dribble of blood leaking from his mouth. "Traitor," Jan whispered.

Raufbold nodded, colour draining from his face. "I couldn't-" He slumped to the floor, the last breath leaking from his body.

Jan glared at Raufbold. "Save your excuses for someone who cares," the sergeant muttered. The sound of rapid footfalls echoed along the tunnel, getting closer by the moment. Jan dropped to one knee, snatching the spare pistol from the dead mercenary's grasp. The sergeant waited until he could see the enemy's eyes before firing his crossbow, stopping five of the intruders as they ran towards him. The last he shot with the pistol before tossing it aside. Supplies of gunpowder in the station were strictly rationed, so the weapon would be of little use. Already more mercenaries were running along the corridor towards Jan. He strode back to the secret entrance, all too aware of the next wave of mercenaries approaching from behind him. But Jan found his escape route was closed off, as if the door had been wedged shut from the other side. "Bescheiden! Bescheiden, are you there?"

"I can hear you, sergeant," a quiet voice replied.

"This door's jammed, I can't move it from my side. Can you get it open from where you are?"

"I can't. I'm sorry, but I have my orders."

Jan loosed off three more shots from his crossbow, finishing the cartridge of bolts he had loaded into it. He ripped that free and slotted his spare cartridge into place. "What did you say?"

“I’m not allowed to open the door.”

“Why not?” Jan demanded, aware how little time he had before the mercenaries were upon him.

“You heard what Henschmann’s messenger said-everybody in the station must die.”

Realisation sank through the sergeant like a stone in water. “Damn you, Bescheiden!”

“I’m already damned,” the traitor replied. “What’s one more damnation among so many?”

Jan threw his shoulder against the door again and again, trying to force it open, but the heavy slab of wood would not move. The sergeant peered back along the tunnel where the shapes of oncoming mercenaries were all too visible. Well, if he was going to die down here, he wanted to take as many of these bastards with him as possible. Better to die like a man, fighting for what he believed. Jan clamped a dagger between his teeth and charged at the onrushing wave of attackers, firing bolt after bolt at them from his crossbow until it was exhausted. He twisted it round in his hands, turning the stock into a bludgeon against his foes. His last thoughts were a prayer for Kurt and the other watchmen: save them, Manann, if you can. Bescheiden leaned against the door, listening to the sounds of pain and death from the tunnel beyond it. He had driven a handful of wedges into place around the wooden barrier, making it impossible for the sergeant to retreat back into the station. Now he forced himself to listen to Woxholt’s last moments, tears of grief and guilt streaming down his cheeks. He was still weeping when Faulheit found him, kneeling beside the door. “Willy? Willy, what is it? What happened?”

“The sergeant,” Bescheiden whispered. “He sacrificed himself to save us. The sergeant found Raufbold with the mercenaries, on the other side of this door.”

“Raufbold was a traitor?”

The turncoat nodded. “Woxholt ordered me to wedge the door shut with him on the other side.”

“Sweet Shallya,” Faulheit gasped. “Is he…?”

Bescheiden closed his eyes. “The sergeant’s dead. He died to save me. To save all of us.” Kurt had no idea how many of the enemy he and the others on the ground floor had killed. In the first hour of the siege they must have slain or mortally wounded dozens of mercenaries, firing arrows and bolts through gaps in the barricades. No matter how many of the hired killers they stopped, there was always another wave, another attack. Kurt knew it was simply a matter of time before they ran out of ammunition. Once that happened those outside would need mere minutes to breach the barricades. Then the watchmen’s choices would become very narrow,

very quickly. The three of them might escape via the secret passage linking the station with Molly's bordello, but Kurt had no intention of abandoning the others. They could flee to the basement and hope to find some escape route, swimming to safety if possible. Failing that, a last stand on the upper level. But the chances that any of them would get out alive from either level were slender, at best.

Holismus and Scheusal had proven brave and resolute in the face of near certain death. Both Black Caps had stood their ground, not flinching from the threats hurled at them by those outside the station. It wasn't easy to keep your nerve when a single wall was all that separated you from a horde of paid murderers, hungry for your demise. Kurt was proud of his men, and had little doubt the rest of his recruits were doing just as well. Whatever happened, they had proven themselves. It was a shame so few-if any-of them were likely to survive the night.

Kurt had stationed himself by the entrance, leaning against the barricade for support. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept, but that didn't matter now. His body was running on pure adrenaline, leaving a bitter, metallic taste in his mouth. He fired the last bolt from his crossbow and reached down for a fresh cartridge. But there was nothing left, his hand scrabbling at bare floorboards. "I'm out!" he called to the other two. Scheusal was standing at a window to Kurt's left, while Holismus had taken charge of defending the south side of the building. Scheusal held up a half-empty quiver of arrows, while Holismus was also down to his last cartridge of bolts. Kurt spat out a curse, unable to believe they'd gone through their meagre supplies of ammunition so fast. It was decision time.

"Get ready to fall back," he called to the others. They looked at him, uncertain what he was saying. "Use the last of your arrows and bolts first-make them count-before you fall back to the staircases."

Scheusal nodded, his face a mask of quiet determination. "Where are we going? Up or down?"

Kurt took a deep breath. "My place is here, in the station. I was the one who chose to stand and fight, so I should stay here as long I can. You two will fall back to the basement. Tell Sergeant Woxholt to get everyone down there out, if possible. Failing that, you can try using Cobbius as a hostage to fortune. I doubt he'll be worth anything now, dead or alive, but it's a chance."

"What about you, captain?" Holismus asked.

"I'm going upstairs. I should have got Gerta and Belladonna out before this started, they're my responsibility. I won't see them violated on my account." Kurt had few illusions the mercenaries would be taking any prisoners, nor about what the hired killers would do if they captured two women alive. If the worst came to the worst-No, there

was still a chance, he told himself. There had to be. “I’ll get them out of here, one way or another,” he told Holismus and Scheusal. “You both understand what to do?”

The two watchmen nodded. Scheusal loosed a last arrow through the window before throwing his bow aside. “I’m out!” he yelled, picking up a double-headed axe in one hand and a mace in the other.

“Me too!” Holismus cried, abandoning his empty crossbow for two short swords.

“Alright,” Kurt replied. “Get down those stairs and take position at the bottom. You can use the enemy’s numbers against them for a while, they’ll have to climb down over their own dead to get to you. But if the situation becomes hopeless, tell Jan he’s under orders to find a way out for you-understand?” Both men nodded. “Good luck-to all of us!” Gerta summoned Belladonna to help her with the boiling cauldron of soup. “I had hoped to serve this to the men later on, but I don’t think there’s going to be a later on,” she said, smiling for a moment. “Let’s give it to our friends outside instead, yes?”

Belladonna couldn’t help smile at Gerta’s cheerful demeanour. “Let’s.”

Between the two of them, the women were able to slide the massive cauldron over to a table in front of a window overlooking Three Penny Bridge. Belladonna stuck her head out and looked down at the scene below. The vast horde that had threatened to overrun the station earlier was much reduced, as evidenced by the dozens of corpses littering the cobbles. But there were still far, far too many of the mercenaries. “Hey! Is anybody down there thirsty?” She rapidly pulled her head back inside as a dozen arrows were fired at her, several shooting in through the window. “Looks like soup’s up,” she said.

“I hope they like vegetable broth, boiling hot,” Gerta replied. With a mighty effort, the two women tipped the cauldron so it emptied itself over the dozens of men directly below. The downpour was greeted with howls of pain and anger. To finish the job, Gerta shoved the heavy cauldron out the window. The cook wiped both hands on her apron, before picking up a wickedly sharp carving knife in each fist. “Let’s see what more damage we can do, eh?” she suggested.

Belladonna nodded, retrieving her crossbow from the floor. “Sounds like a plan.”

But before either woman could move, Kurt appeared in the kitchen doorway. “They’ve taken the ground floor,” he said, gasping for breath. “We have to barricade the staircases, try and slow them down.”

“Where’s Scheusal?” Gerta asked.

“I sent him and Holismus down to the basement,” the captain replied. He glanced into the mess, where a table and chairs stood awaiting the watchmen’s next meal. “Help me get those to the stairs!” Narbig appeared from the captain’s office, an axe in one hand and a dagger in the other. “Can you hold the staircase at the other end of the hallway?” the captain asked.

“I can try.”

“Do more than try. Unchain Deschamp so he can help-his neck’s on the line here, too.” Narbig hurried away, leaving the others to their task. Belladonna and the captain stood the wooden table up against the entrance to the eastern staircase. It was tall enough to block all access from below. Gerta brought chairs from the mess and those were added to the makeshift barricade, bolstering the defences. The captain ripped his office door from its hinges and stacked it against the growing assemblage. Satisfied for the moment, he sent Gerta to help Narbig and Deschamp at the other end of the halfway. When she’d gone, he slumped against the desperate collision of wood, their last defence against the enemy onslaught. Belladonna sat on the floor beside him, still clutching her crossbow. “You’re out,” the captain said. “Out of bolts.”

She looked at her weapon and laughed. “I hadn’t noticed. Narbig’s still got a few, but after that-”

“Hand-to-hand combat.”

“Yes.” Belladonna tried to rub the sleep out of her eyes, exhaustion kicking in now her adrenaline rush had passed. “How long before they get through the barricades downstairs?”

“Any moment now.” The sound of axes and clubs hammering at wood drifted up the staircase from below. As they listened, the noise suddenly got louder before it was replaced by the roars of murderous men and the thundering of rampaging feet. The captain got back on his feet, drawing the short sword he had strapped at his side, a dagger clutched in his other hand. “Here they come.” Scheusal had been first down the stairs, Holismus close behind, both finding themselves knee-deep in the rising tide. They splashed along the corridor, looking for the others and ran into Faulheit and Bescheiden emerging from the unlit room. “Where’s the sergeant?” Scheusal asked. “Captain Schnell says-”

“Woxholt’s dead,” Faulheit replied, his voice drained of emotion. “Raufbold too.”

“How did they-” Holismus began, but Scheusal cut him off.

“That doesn’t matter now, Lothar! We’ve got to fortify our position or find a way out. The barricades upstairs will give way any minute.” He glanced around the basement. “Is there a way out?”

“We found a secret tunnel,” Bescheiden said. “Raufbold was using

it to smuggle messages to the enemy. The sergeant went in to fight them, and ordered me to seal him inside. It's hopeless," he snapped. "Don't you understand? It's hopeless! We're all going to die down here in this bloody place!"

Scheusal slapped him hard across the face, once, twice and again. Bescheiden glared at Scheusal, ready to fight him but Scheusal grabbed him by the wrists. "That's better, Willy! Keep hold of that anger-we're going to need it, all of us!"

Holismus had been peering into the four rooms of the basement. "We can't defend all of these spaces. We need to choose one and make our stand in there."

Faulheit pointed at the cell where Cobbius was still chained to the wall, the rising water now around his thighs. "That one. We can always offer him as a bargaining chip."

"That's what the captain said," Scheusal recalled. "Alright, you and Bescheiden gather all our weapons in there, while Holismus and I defend the doorway." The sound of wood splintering and men screaming for blood upstairs suddenly got louder. "That's it, they're inside! Everybody move-now!"

Cobbius smirked as the terrified watchmen gathered in his cell. "Now you'll pay for arresting me! I'm not any common criminal, you fools! I'm-" The prisoner's arrogant boasts were cut short when Scheusal shoved his black cap into Cobbius' open mouth, gagging him.

"If I have to die down here, I don't want your voice to be the last thing I bloody hear!" The upper level barricades withstood the first onslaught of mercenaries to come up the stairs. Narbig, Deschamp and Gerta held their ground at one end of the hallway, while Belladonna and Kurt stood firm at the other. Soon the invaders brought up axes and started hacking at the wooden barricades, but it was slow work. Mercenaries tried to throw flaming torches over the top of the blockade at the Riddra end of the hallway, but Gerta was having none of that. She picked up all those that did get over and tossed them back again. Screams of anguish and the smell of burning flesh signalled the success of her response, and no more torches were flung into the hallway. After a while the attackers despaired of penetrating the blockades and went back down the stairs, searching for another way to reach their quarry.

Belladonna slid back down to the floor, her legs giving way beneath her. She'd no idea what the time was, whether it was still Konistag or a new day. If midnight had passed, that meant it was Angestag, the 32nd of Vorgeheim. She couldn't help smiling at the thought of that. "What's so amusing?" Kurt asked.

"I was wondering whether it's my birthday yet," she replied.

The captain sat beside her. "I stopped counting mine years ago.

Things like that didn't seem important anymore. Certainly nothing to celebrate."

"Because you're still alive and the people you love are dead?"

Anger flared in his eyes. "What do you know about-" He stopped himself. "Of course-you worked in the commander's office. You read my file before volunteering for this station."

"Wouldn't you?"

He shrugged. "I suppose so."

"What happened in Altdorf, what happened to your wife-it wasn't your fault."

"Try telling that to my father, the great general." Kurt laughed, but there was bitterness in his voice. "I wonder what he'd make of my tactics here. Not much, I suspect."

"What would Old Ironbeard have done differently?"

"Never start a fight you can't finish, that's his philosophy. He would have retreated, regrouped-come back with a stronger force and taken Suiddock by storm."

"That would never work in Marienburg," Belladonna observed. "But how can he blame you for Sara dying in childbirth? It happens all the time."

"I don't want to talk about this. Not here, not now," Kurt insisted.

"Why not? Manann knows, we'll probably be dead long before morning."

"I don't want to spend my last minutes alive explaining myself to you-"

"Maybe not," she cut in. "But you still need to face what happened. Until you find some peace with that, it'll keep haunting you, Kurt-in this life and the next."

"You believe there's another life after this one?"

"I hope so," Belladonna said, a wry smile on her lips. "I'm feeling short-changed by this one." Kurt turned away from her, tears welling up in his eyes. "What did I say?" He shook his head, overcome by emotion. She waited until he'd regained his composure. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry."

"Yes, you did-but maybe you're right. Maybe it's time I faced up to what happened." He took a deep breath. "My brother, Karl, he was always the baby of the family. I was so proud the day Karl joined the regiment, following in my footsteps. When Sara told me she was having a baby, it made my joy complete. Then Archaon's Chaos army came, threatening to destroy everything we held dear. We were given orders to advance on Middenheim, but I didn't want to go. I knew our child was due any day. Sara had lost babies before, stillbirths, and I didn't want to risk her going through that again on her own. I went to my father, begged him for permission to stay behind-but the general

wouldn't allow that. He said my duty was at the front, making sure Karl didn't get into trouble. It was Karl who talked my father round."

"So you stayed in Altdorf?"

Kurt nodded. "All seemed well. Sara had a boy, and we called him Luc. I left as soon as I could, but a day too late. Karl died on the battlefield, because I wasn't there to protect him. My father, the mighty General Schnell, had me dishonourably discharged from the regiment. When I got home, I discovered there had been complications after I left and Sara had died while I was away. My father had me banished from Altdorf and took my son away. I haven't seen Luc since." He grimaced, fighting back tears. "I was damned, no matter what I did. That's why I hope there is no next life. How could I ever face my wife or my brother, knowing how I let them down?"

Belladonna took Kurt's face in her hands and stared into his ice-blue eyes. "You've got to listen to me. Everything that happened would have happened, even if you had done things differently. You can't know you'd have been able to save your brother. Your wife's death was a tragedy, but it couldn't have been helped. Even if you'd been there, you couldn't have saved her."

"But I would have been there with her, at the end," Kurt whispered. "That's all we can do for each other, when the end comes for us-and I failed her."

"Even if you couldn't be by her side, you were with her in spirit. She had to know that. You can't keep punishing yourself for things you can't change," Belladonna whispered to him. "What's past is passed. Remember that-otherwise you're a dead man walking, waiting for the end."

Kurt smiled, despite his grief. "You sound like Jan."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"That's how it was meant." The captain got back to his feet. "I hope he's alright down there." In the basement the four surviving watchmen were fighting for their lives. Scheusal and Holismus had taken station inside the empty doorway of the cell, using their weapons and the narrowness of the entrance to keep the mercenaries at bay. Scheusal hacked his way through half a dozen of the enemy with his axe, cleaving their heads with mighty swings of the double-edged blade, while Holismus wielded his two short swords with deadly efficiency. But no matter how well they fought or how many of the intruders they slaughtered, still more kept coming.

Eventually their luck ran out and Scheusal was sliced through the forearm by a mercenary's blade, cutting right to the bone. He staggered backwards, shouting at Faulheit to take his place. The obese watchman waddled forward in the waist-deep water, using Scheusal's discarded mace as his weapon of choice. He caved in three heads with

it before losing his balance and tumbling backwards into the water. Bescheiden leapt into his place, firing the last bolts from his crossbow before using it as a bludgeon.

But he withstood only a few moments before succumbing to his fear and retreating to cower by Cobbius.

Faulheit recovered enough to take Bescheiden's place in the doorway. An enemy blade stabbed Holismus in the side and blood gushed from the wound, staining the seawater around him crimson. He collapsed, leaving just Faulheit to stand guard. "Now you shall all die!" a mercenary hissed, victory in his eyes.

"Not on my watch," Faulheit retorted, burying the mace in his opponent's skull. The Black Cap fought like a daemon, swiping his weapon back and forth, taking out one mercenary after another, until he had accounted for half a dozen. "This isn't so hard," he shouted back over his shoulder to the others.

"Martin, look out!" Scheusal shouted, but the warning came too late. A mercenary threw a dagger and it stabbed deep into Faulheit's abdomen, burying itself in his rolls of fat. He sank into the water, disappearing beneath the surface, his arms flailing wildly. All the watchmen were down, wounded and unable to defend themselves. The battle for the basement was lost.

The mercenary who had felled Faulheit waded into the cell, a short sword in both hands. He had a goatee and cruel smile, his delight at their defeat all too evident. "You fought well, but to no avail. We have our orders. None of you is to-" His words were cut short by a word from one of his men. They leaned closer and whispered in his ear. He listened, brow furrowing. "You're certain of this?" The other man nodded and withdrew. The mercenary with the goatee folded his arms, still clutching his short swords.

Scheusal glared at the victor. "What are you waiting for? If you're going to finish us, do it!"

"I have my orders," the mercenary replied. "Your fates are being decided elsewhere." Everything had fallen silent on the station's upper level. All the mercenaries had withdrawn and even the rainstorm outside had stopped, as if pausing for breath. Kurt stood with his ear to the barricade, listening intently. "Can you hear that?" he asked.

"I can't hear anything," Belladonna replied.

"Listen!" he urged. From the silence a new sound was approaching, wooden wheels on the cobbles outside, coming closer. Kurt strode to the nearest window overlooking Three Penny Bridge. It was dark outside with storm clouds hiding the moon's light, but the bridge was lit by two lines of mercenaries, all holding blazing torches. An ornate coach rolled to a stop outside the station and its driver jumped down to the street, before hurrying round to open the

passenger door. He unfolded a set of steps and moved aside, allowing the occupant to emerge. Henschmann climbed down from the coach, the burning torches throwing cruel shadows across his unhappy face. He looked round, taking in the battle-scarred mercenaries standing to attention, the piles of dead and dying men littering the span, and the beleaguered station. Henschmann cleared his throat before calling out: "I would speak with Captain Schnell, if he's still alive!"

"Alive and kicking," Kurt replied. "What do you want?"

"I wish to talk with you, captain."

"I'm listening."

"It would be easier if you came down here, on to the bridge."

"Thanks, but no. You'll forgive my suspicious nature, but last time I set foot outside to talk with one your thugs I was fortunate to make it back inside alive."

"You need not fear. I am a man of my word, and I promise your safety. None shall harm you while I am present," Henschmann vowed.

"Thanks for the promise, but I'm staying put."

"Very well. I come to offer you and your Black Caps safe passage."

"Really?"

"Agree to my terms and you may all walk out of that station, away from Suiddock unharmed and unmolested. I give my word on that."

"And what are these terms?" Kurt asked.

"Firstly, release Abram Cobbius into my custody."

"Assuming he's still alive."

"Indeed."

"What else?"

"The Watch will withdraw from Suiddock, permanently. Your commander will make a guarantee that no more Black Caps shall be garrisoned within this district- ever."

"Alas, I have little sway with the commander," Kurt commented, "so I cannot be certain he would give such a guarantee, either now or in the future."

"It would be enough for now if you were to make such a guarantee. I'm sure the commander can be persuaded to endorse your decision in this matter," Henschmann said with a smile.

"Yes. I've heard you two are close, Casanova," the captain retorted.

"You would be wise not to try my patience with insults! I give you one minute to consult with your recruits. Since their lives are at stake, they should have some say in the matter, don't you agree?"

"Since when did you become an advocate of democracy?"

"You have one minute, Schnell. Use it wisely, otherwise it will

certainly be your last."

"I don't need a minute to think about the offer, and neither do my Black Caps. We're staying put."

"And that is your last word on the subject?"

"You heard me the first time. Now get off my bridge, before I have you thrown off it."

"How regrettable," Henschmann said. "Someone so brave, so resourceful and yet so headstrong. Very well, it shall be as you ask. I leave now. I am not responsible for what happens next. Remember that." He turned to get back into his carriage, but the door had swung shut. Henschmann cleared his throat, to prompt the driver into opening the door for him, but nothing happened. "I wish to leave!" he announced in a voice that made it clear trouble was imminent. Still the driver didn't move. "Did you hear me? I said I-"

The driver slumped to his knees before falling on to the cobbles. Something was embedded in his back. It looked like the hilt of a knife, suggesting the blade was buried deep inside the driver. A series of whistling sounds cut through the air, accompanied by flashes of silver. Nine of the mercenaries cried out in pain, before collapsing, all clutching at their chests or necks. One directly below Kurt's window had been holding a burning torch. It fell beside him on the cobbles, illuminating his fate. A star protruded from his neck, green liquid on it seeping into the wound. No, not seeping in, Kurt realised-eating into the wound.

He stepped back from the window, his mind racing. Kurt's mind rebelled against the reality of what was happening outside. It wasn't possible, it couldn't be happening. These monsters always stayed in their catacombs, deep beneath the Empire, plotting and planning. Could they now be rising up, ready to storm the battlements and alleyways of Suiddock? No, he realised, it was not simply Suiddock that was under threat. The fate of all Marienburg was now at stake-and nobody else had realised the terrifying truth of what was happening. The ratmen had risen.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

All those in the basement, both watchmen and mercenaries, heard the terrifying sound of men screaming before they saw what was responsible for inducing such a fearful cacophony. Grown men were weeping and howling above, begging for mercy, crying out in abject horror. Those below listened incredulously, unable to believe what they were hearing. “Sweet Shallya,” Scheusal muttered, tying a makeshift bandage round the wound on his left arm. “What is happening upstairs?”

The mercenary with the goatee sent one of his men to the ground floor to find out. The hired killer returned moments later, but now his face was ashen and he was wringing his hands like a frightened old woman. “Monsters,” he gasped to the mercenary leader. “Hoffman, the others are being torn apart by them!”

“Nonsense!” Hoffman retorted. “What do these monsters look like?”

“Imagine rats the size of men,” Scheusal interjected, “but standing on their hind legs. Walking vermin clad in armour, wielding swords and daggers stained with some diabolical poison. Creatures ripped from your darkest nightmares, made flesh and blood, their eyes glittering like black diamonds.”

“Y-Yes, that’s them,” the petrified mercenary whimpered. “H-How did you know?”

“They’re called the ratmen,” the watchman replied. “I saw them once, when I was a boy in Bretonnia, and they’ve haunted my dreams ever since. Besides, there’s a cadre of them behind Hoffman.”

The mercenary leader spun round to find a half a dozen ratmen emerging from the other cell on the station’s south side. They were a blur of movement in the darkness, offering mere glimpses of their fearsome appearance-armour and fangs, hissing snouts and malevolent eyes, blades clasped in blackened fists and claws. They were vermin that stood on their hind legs like men, creatures of hunger and fury. They were evil personified, fear and loathing made flesh. They were every worst nightmare, brought to life. “Taal’s teeth!” He flashed his short swords through the air, decapitating the first two ratmen and taking the arms from two more. The crippled monsters squealed in anguish, while the severed heads plopped into the waist-high water, jaws and teeth still gnashing hungrily.

Scheusal leapt forward to help Hoffman, slicing his axe clean through the next ratman before burying the double-headed blade deep inside the final monster.

He ripped it free, the creature’s armour shattering outwards,

unable to withstand such ferocity. Meanwhile Hoffman had dealt with the armless ratmen, cutting off their hairy, sinister snouts and stabbing them through the heart. Even when they were dead, the mercenary leader kept hacking at them, cutting the creatures to pieces. “Save your energy,” Scheusal said. “We’re going to need it to get out of here alive.”

Hoffman stopped, panting and gasping for breath. “Where did they come from?”

“The catacombs,” Holismus replied. He staggered over to them, one hand clutching at his wounded side, the other gripping the hilt of a short sword still stained with mercenary blood. “Look at their feet.” The others followed the line of his arm, pointing at the body of a ratman floating in the murky floodwater. There was webbing between its toes, evidence of generation upon generation spent in the water tunnels and flooded chambers deep beneath Marienburg. “They must have swum up, rising with the tide, waiting for their chance to attack under cover of darkness.”

Scheusal tilted his head, listening to the sound of men screaming above. “They must be up on the bridge too. If we’re lucky, this was simply an isolated unit, sent here to secure the lower level.”

Hoffman wiped a hand across his face, fear all too evident in his eyes. “And if we’re not lucky?”

“There could be hundreds more where these six came from, coming up behind their advance scouts. We need to get out of here and now.” The Black Cap turned to his colleagues. “Who can move?”

Holismus simply nodded. Faulheit raised a weak hand, his other clamped round the dagger stuck in his bulging stomach. “I’m coming with you,” he replied. “I’m not dying down here, not in this hole.”

“Good,” Scheusal said, before shifting his gaze to the other watchman. “Willy?”

The white-faced Bescheiden was cowering in the corner beside Cobbius, his entire body quaking and quivering with fear. “Y-Yes… I-I’m r-ready…” he whispered.

“Then let’s get going,” Scheusal commanded. “Move with a purpose, people!”

Hoffman grabbed the watchman by the arm. “Where are you going?” he demanded.

“Upstairs. The tide’s still rising and this place is a death trap.”

“But those… things… are upstairs!”

“The ratmen are down here as well, in case you hadn’t noticed,” Scheusal retorted. “My captain is upstairs, he’ll devise a strategy for beating these things. Our place is at his side. You and your men can come help us, or find your own way out-that’s up to you.”

Hoffman jerked a thumb towards the frightened prisoner. Cobbius

was still shackled to the wall, his eyes staring at them in mute terror. “What about Abram?”

Scheusal glared at the man who had tortured and murdered Mutig, amongst others. “I hope the ratmen eat him alive. Come on, let’s get up these stairs!” Within a minute of the first deaths, Three Penny Bridge was swarming with ratmen. The black shapes appeared from the shadows, carrying shields and swords, blades and slingshots, creeping forwards from the darkness. As they advanced the mercenaries collapsed inwards, some men gibbering in terror while others cursed and sneered at the enemy, daring the ratmen to attack. Henschmann ordered his hired killers to form a protective circle around him and his coach. He still had hopes of escaping this unspeakable menace, even if his driver had been the first to die. By Sigmar, he’d drive himself off the bridge if he had to. Whatever else happened, Henschmann had no intention of dying here. “I said get into circles, one inside the other. I want at least three men between those monsters and me at all times!” he bellowed at the mercenaries.

When the first ratman onslaught came, it was swift and merciless. A hundred of the creatures charged at the outer circle of mercenaries, squealing in a high-pitched war cry that deafened the men and drove fear deeper into their hearts. As the ratmen got closer, so did the sickening stench of their rancorous fur and hungry breath, a stomach-turning odour worse than any rotting corpse. Then the creatures were upon the mercenaries, flinging themselves at the ring of hired killers, running fearlessly into swords and daggers. The men responded with blade and bow, bolt and courage, slaughtering wave upon wave of the ravening vermin.

But still the ratmen came, their numbers unceasing, their attack unchecked by losing so many so quickly. A few minutes before the mercenaries had enjoyed superior numbers over the handful of Black Caps defending the station on Three Penny Bridge. Now the advantage was reversed, with countless ratmen surrounding and relentlessly driving themselves at the ring of mercenaries.

Henschmann watched as his outer circle slowly, inevitably, crumbled beneath sheer weight of numbers. Overhead the moon emerged from behind thinning storm clouds, bathing the bridge with a pale, blue light that made blood look black. A fitting metaphor for this ill-matched battle, he decided. His warriors were fighting well, their weaponry and skills a match for the savagery and sheer volume of ratmen, but soon the mercenaries would lose heart. They had come expecting a simple conflict, a few minutes of fighting followed by a rich and deserved victory celebration. Captain Schnell had frustrated them with a well organised and executed defensive strategy, despite having vastly inferior numbers. Now this new enemy had emerged

from the catacombs, intent on slaughter and conquest.

What did the ratmen want? Henschmann knew that was the key. They had remained beneath the surface of Marienburg for generations, perhaps centuries, rarely venturing above ground. Now the ratmen had burst forth, all their attention focused upon Three Penny Bridge- why? The crime boss cursed himself for leaving that fool Abram Cobbius to negotiate with the ratmen. Sweet Shallya, what a mess. Henschmann pushed his recriminations to one side. Either there would be time for them later, or it wouldn't matter what mistakes had led him to this time and place. He needed to find a way out of this mess. That had to be his sole priority now.

He staggered sideways, pushed in that direction as the rings of mercenaries encircling him moved across the bridge, driven sideways like a crab by the ratmen horde's attacks. Henschmann realised his thugs were being pushed away from the coach, away from his best chance of escape. He yelled at them to reverse the enemy's thrust but nobody was listening. All the mercenaries were too busy fighting for their own lives to worry about anything their paymaster had to say.

In a matter of moments Henschmann abandoned the coach to its fate and was already working on a new strategy. If Schnell and his watchmen had been able to defend the station against a vastly superior force, why couldn't they do the same? No sooner had the thought occurred to Henschmann than a dozen men burst out of the station, all armed with blades and flaming torches. Schnell was leading them on to the bridge.

"Henschmann! You've got to fall back into the station! You and your men haven't got a chance out there. Fall back into the station," the captain shouted, bellowing to be heard above the melee. Hoffman and Scheusal were the last to leave the basement, both staying behind while the rest of the watchmen and mercenaries made their way up the stairs. The pair was turning to leave when a host of ratmen sprang up from out of the water. More than a dozen of the ratmen crowded into the flooded hallway, chattering their teeth hungrily, their black eyes gleaming with malevolent hatred. "Go!" Hoffman bellowed at Scheusal, who was closer to the staircase. "Move!" Metal flashed through the air and the Black Cap instinctively ducked, narrowly escaping a cluster of throwing stars. They thudded into the wall beyond Scheusal's head, their green poison eating its way into the stone. He looked back to see Hoffman stricken by a star in the chest, its venom already devouring the mercenary's flesh. "Go, damn you!"

Scheusal fled up the stairs, leaving the hired killer to hold back the advancing ratmen. Within moments Hoffman's screams were echoing up the staircase, before being abruptly silenced. Scheusal quickened his pace, all too aware of the ratmen close behind. He raced

up the stairs and on to the station's ground floor. "Are you the last?" a voice demanded of him. Scheusal looked round to see who had asked the question and was surprised to see Henschmann standing nearby. "Are you the last?" the crime boss yelled.

"Yes," Scheusal gasped. "The ratmen slaughtered the rest."

"Right, he's the last!" Henschmann shouted to a cluster of mercenaries. "Seal it up!" The hired killers pushed a barricade of broken furniture across the staircase, blocking the ratmen's progress. Scheusal glanced across at the other steps that came up from the basement, but they were already blockaded with doors torn from the holding cells. The other barricades were back in position over the station's doors and windows. About thirty mercenaries were guarding the blockades, while Schnell and the other Black Caps were gathered in the centre of the room. Scheusal lumbered over to join them.

"Good, you made it too," the captain said on seeing Scheusal's approach. "Now, where's Jan?"

"The sergeant's dead," Bescheiden sobbed.

"Jan's dead?" Schnell gasped, staggering back a step as if stabbed in the heart. "How?"

"I killed him," the weeping watchman replied.

Schnell's hand moved to the dagger sheathed at his side. "Why?"

"He didn't kill him," Scheusal cut in, "not like you're thinking. The sergeant found a secret tunnel. Mercenaries were using it to get into the basement. He went into the tunnel and ordered Willy to wedge the doorway shut, seal it off. The sergeant sacrificed himself to save the rest of us."

The captain stared at Bescheiden, murder in his eyes. "Is this true?"

"I sealed the tunnel," he confessed. "The sergeant died because of me."

"You were only following orders," Scheusal said, trying to console the weeping watchman.

"That doesn't make what I did right," Bescheiden cried, before slumping to the floor.

Gerta was busy tending to the other watchmen's wounds with limited resources. She was tearing strips of cloth from her petticoats to bandage stabs and cuts, but it was a losing battle. "I need to get Faulheit upstairs," she said. "I daren't take that dagger out of his guts, otherwise he'll bleed to death. We need a healer and an apothecary if he's to survive much longer."

"Thanks for the encouragement," the pale, perspiring Faulheit commented from the floor.

"Alright," the captain agreed. "Scheusal, you and Gerta take Martin upstairs."

Scheusal looked about. “Where’s Narbig?”

“He’s already up there,” Belladonna replied. “Something happened to him when he saw the ratmen outside on the bridge. It’s… It’s as if his mind has broken. We had to leave him up there.”

As Scheusal helped Gerta get Faulheit to the stairs, the captain told Bescheiden to go with them. “You can stay up there, help her look after Martin and Narbig. Scheusal, come straight back once you’ve gotten Faulheit settled. We’ll need all the able-bodied fighters we can get down here.” Henschmann was directing his mercenaries to reinforce the barricades when the captain and Belladonna approached. The ratmen horde outside was throwing itself against the blockaded doors and windows, smashing against them with fearful force. Each blow pushed back the barriers a little further, threatening to break them apart altogether. Each fresh attack resounded with an almighty thud, as if the ratmen were crushing their own kind against the station exterior, such was the hunger to get inside. The noise was quite unnerving, the building shuddering beneath each blow. Henschmann was relieved to step away from the barricades to speak with the Black Caps. “Happenstance makes for strange bedfellows, don’t you agree?”

“Trust me, the last thing we’ll ever be is bedfellows,” Schnell retorted.

“Nevertheless, thank you for offering the sanctuary of your station.”

“Once they had finished slaughtering you and your men, we would have been next,” the captain said. “Combining our forces was a strategic imperative-nothing more, nothing less.”

“He’s not one to accept thanks gracefully, is he?” Henschmann commented to Belladonna.

“Can you blame him? Not that long ago you gave orders for your thugs to butcher us as an example to the rest of Suiddock and the city. We don’t have much reason to trust you.”

“A fair point,” he conceded, before looking around the station. “You know, I’m not sure I’ve ever been inside this building. Not much to look at it, is it?”

“It does the job,” Schnell growled. “So do we.”

Henschmann sighed. “Much as I appreciate your anger, may I suggest we put our mutual dislike aside until this current crisis is resolved? Sniping at each other will not help our present situation.”

“Fine,” the captain snapped. “But don’t expect me to shake your hand when this is over.”

“Understood.” The crime boss studied his surroundings. “How long do you think we can-”

Belladonna held up a hand for quiet. “Listen!” The ratmen had stopped pounding against the station exterior, creating an eerie

silence. But a new sound now took its place, one even more disturbing than the thudding of bodies against blockades. An itching, scratching noise started in one corner of the building, and quickly spread, until it felt as if all the walls were under attack. Henschmann and the Black Caps moved to the barricades, trying to get a glimpse of what was happening outside. Through the gap in the blockade the crime boss could see one of the ratmen gnawing at the barrier with its fangs and claws.

"They're trying to gnaw their way inside," he realised. "How strong is this building?"

Schnell shook his head. "Not strong enough to withstand a sustained attack-of any kind."

"Well, there must be a way out of here," Henschmann said, a tremor of fear in his voice.

"Not anymore, thanks to you and your men," Belladonna replied.

The gnawing and scratching was getting louder by the moment-and closer. The crime boss swallowed hard, aware his men were looking to him for leadership. This was no time to show weakness or terror, no matter what he might be feeling. "There's a tunnel in the basement-"

"We know," a watchman replied as he came downstairs. "But the ratmen control that level now."

Schnell pointed to the hidden door that led to the adjacent bordello. "What about Molly's place?"

"I checked that earlier," Belladonna said. "I could hear the ratmen in there, too."

"You can take that as a no," the captain concluded. "There's no way out of here. Not alive, anyway."

"What do these monsters want?" one of the mercenaries asked, fear obvious on his features.

"A shard of warpstone," Schnell said. "Not just any warpstone, but a particularly rare one."

"How can you know that?"

"I don't-at least, not for certain. But why else would the ratmen risk discovery with such an overt attack in the middle of Marienburg? They want this shard more than anything else we can imagine."

"Give it to them," Henschmann urged. "Once they've got the shard, we'll be safe."

"There's no guarantee of that," Schnell said. "I wouldn't surrender Cobbius to you and I won't surrender the shard to those monsters outside. It's a matter of principle."

"Your principles will get us all slaughtered!" the crime boss snarled.

"Maybe. But I can't surrender the warpstone fragment, even if I

wanted to-it isn't here. I smuggled the shard out of the station, not long before your mercenaries attacked. I had my suspicions the ratmen would come looking for it. No matter what happens to us, it will not fall into their possession. We don't know what power the warpstone will have if they secured the shard, and I dare not sacrifice all of Marienburg for the sake of my own life. That's the coward's way, Henschmann. It's the sort of deal you would strike to save your sick, twisted soul-not that it's worth saving."

"Damn you, Schnell!"

The captain smiled. "No need, Casanova, I'm already damned." Belladonna was first to see the wall giving way. At first she thought it was exhaustion playing tricks on her tired eyes. A section of the front wall that faced out on to Three Penny Bridge seemed to shimmer and shift as her gaze passed over it. She looked closer and realised the surface was moving, crumbling, giving way. "Captain, I think you'd better come look at this!" Schnell was at her side within moments, after abandoning his argument with Henschmann. By the time he arrived, a hole had appeared in the wall. Then claws burst through the tiny gap, tearing at the stone, smearing green poison over the edges. Belladonna watched in horror as the stone rotted away, dissolving. Soon the snout of a ratman was forcing its way into the gap, so the long fangs protruded into the station. Schnell cut off the creature's snout, a blade slicing clean through the bones and skin and rancid flesh. Black blood spurted from the hole as the ratman withdrew, shrieking in pain. But another took its place, again attacking the hole, endeavouring to make it bigger.

Scheusal shouted from another part of the wall, where a similar intrusion was happening. "We're losing the station," Belladonna whispered, not realising she was thinking out loud.

"I know," Kurt agreed, surprising her. "We have to retreat to the upper level, it's our last chance. Tell Holismus and the other Black Caps, before getting yourself upstairs. We haven't got long now."

By the time Belladonna reached the nearest stairs Henschmann was already hurrying up them. "I want to get a better view of the enemy," he said, embarrassed to have been caught fleeing the ground floor.

"Of course you do," she replied, disgusted by his blatant cowardice. But all thoughts of him vanished when Belladonna reached the upper level, for one simple reason. It was swarming with ratmen. Kurt felt a sick, churning sensation at the base of his stomach as more and more holes appeared in the station walls. Within a few moments of the first breakthrough there were more gaps than they could defend, even with all of Henschmann's surviving mercenaries to help. He looked round, searching for the crime boss, so they could agree on

a strategic withdrawal. But Henschmann was nowhere to be seen. He must have fled upstairs, Kurt realised. Time we were doing the same. "Everybody, prepare to retreat. We're moving to the upper level, see if we can't hold them off from up there."

The mercenaries didn't need to be told twice. Most of them turned and ran towards the staircases, only too eager to withdraw. As soon as the men fled, the barricades started collapsing inwards, giving in to the weight of ratmen outside the station. Kurt shuddered, seeing the fangs and nails of the ravening monsters as they shoved their way inside. Tooth and claw, that's what they'll use to kill us-tooth and claw. Realising that holding the ground floor was a lost cause, he sprinted towards the east staircase where most of the mercenaries were already climbing upwards. But the men turned back, blocking his way, as if they were more afraid of what was above than below. "For the love of Manann, we need to go up! Now!"

The first corpse that came flying down the stairs was that of Narbig, though half his face had been gnawed off. The second corpse was that of a mercenary that Kurt did not recognise. More and more bodies rained down the steps, flung down from above. They were followed by a flurry of throwing stars that buried themselves into the mercenaries still clustered on the staircase. Kurt staggered backwards, the full horror of what must have happened on the upper level sinking in. The ratmen had found some way in and this was the result. At the same time the barricade that had been blocking the station entrance finally gave way and the horde of ratmen gathered outside poured into the building. Kurt dropped to one knee, his legs no longer able to support him. It was over. They were vanquished. Now all that remained was death. He tightened his grip on the two short swords, one in each fist, as the invading ratmen formed a circle around him. Muttering a prayer for the souls of all those who had died in this battle, he flung himself at the ratmen, hacking and slicing his way deep into their number, cleaving heads from torsos and severing limbs with brutal abandon. Then a mace thundered into the side of his head and he knew only darkness. As his senses slipped away, Kurt imagined he could see Sara in the distance, beckoning to him. "I'm coming, my love," he whispered. "I'm coming…"

CHAPTER TWENTY

Kurt opened his eyes and was surprised to find himself still alive. He was kneeling on the blood-strewn floor of the station. Beyond the mass of ratmen surrounding him Kurt could see early morning light on Three Penny Bridge, suggesting it would soon be dawn. A shame he and the others had not been able to hold off the ratmen until daybreak. He doubted the monsters would have dared stay above ground once the sun rose, but such regrets were useless now. A soft voice winced in pain nearby that Kurt recognised. He craned his neck about and saw ten humans being held prisoner by the ratmen. All had a wickedly curved blade held to their throats, the sinister black metal digging into their skin. All bore the bruises and blood of many beatings. They had suffered at the hands of the ratmen, but they were not dead-yet.

Kurt fought off a wave of nausea as his eyes slid in and out of focus, a blinding pain from the side of his head threatening to undo him. He squinted, struggling to make out the faces of those opposite. Three of them were mercenaries, their features unknown to him. But the others were all familiar: Gerta, Faulheit, Bescheiden, Holismus, Scheusal, Belladonna and Henschmann. Why had they been kept alive? More to the point, how was it he had not been killed by the ratmen? The answers to both those questions soon became evident. All the ratmen inside the station suddenly stiffened, straightening their backs and puffing out their chests. Sweet Shallya, Kurt thought, they're standing to attention. But that means-

"Who is the leader?" an ancient, malevolent voice asked, its rasping words heavily accented but still able to be understood. Kurt twisted round to see who was speaking. An old, battle-scarred ratman limped into the station, its fur flecked with grey and silver. The new arrival wore elaborate battle armour, encrusted with numerous metallic decorations, no doubt marking the many conflicts it had fought. Kurt tried to stand, but his legs were still too weak and would not support him.

"I am captain of this station," he replied, contenting himself his voice still had its usual authority.

"What is your name, human?"

"Captain Kurt Schnell of the Marienburg Watch-what's yours?" One of the ratmen guarding Kurt lashed out, smashing the hilt of a sword against the captain's head. He was sent sprawling back on to the floor, but immediately dragged himself back up on to his knees, refusing to be bullied by these creatures.

"I am Garacin the Ghost, longest-lived of all skaven in this city.

Where is the heart stone?"

Kurt frowned, uncertain what was being asked of him. "The heart stone?" Another vicious blow smacked him to the floor, but he refused to be beaten down.

"We seek the heart stone, the lost shard, the missing fragment of our greatest weapon. Too long it has been lost to us, hidden from our eyes by some cunning trickery of the elves. We had our allies lure foolish young elves down into our domain, in the belief one of them would find what was concealed from us. They did as we hoped, but somehow the heart stone was secreted away from us once more. We know the heart stone had been close these past few days, has been kept within these walls. Give it unto us!"

"I don't know what you're talking about-" A third blow struck him, still more brutal than the last. When Kurt had recovered, Garacin made a gesture to the line of ratmen guarding the ten prisoners. A viciously curved blade sliced through one of the mercenary's throats, severing his vocal chords and stopping his screams. He perished in a pool of his own blood, while the ratmen laughed as his twitching body died.

"Surrender the heart stone or surrender the lives of your fellow humans," Garacin hissed.

"I would if I could," Kurt replied.

Another signal from the veteran vermin and it was Faulheit's turn to die. His pleading eyes stared at Kurt as the blade did its bloodthirsty work. So deeply did the ratman guard slice, Faulheit's head was cut free and rolled across the floor towards the captain, coming to rest beside his knees.

"All your friends will die the same way, unless you give us what we want," Garacin warned. Kurt said nothing, his eyes fixed on those of Henschmann. The crime boss' face was bleached white by terror, while a dark stain was spreading downwards from the crotch of his trousers. The ratman leader tired of waiting for a response from Kurt and nodded to his brethren. The second mercenary died, closely followed by the last of the hired killers. That left only Kurt, Gerta, five Black Caps and Henschmann.

"Perhaps you care more for your females," Garacin said. "The younger, more beautiful one dies next, unless you surrender the heart stone unto us."

"I can get it for you," Kurt said. "I know where it is."

"Where?"

"My predecessor has it. I hid the heart stone on him before witch hunters took him away. I can get it back-I just need time."

"That is a luxury you do not possess," Garacin hissed. "Kill the female."

“No!” Kurt protested. “Kill her and I guarantee you will never find what you seek!”

The old ratman stared at him. “I do not believe this. You wish to delay us, knowing we must withdraw before sunrise.”

The captain smiled. “I was trying to delay you, that much is true. But not until sunrise.”

“Then why?” Garacin demanded, his voice a sibilant hiss of hatred. They were the last words he uttered before an arrow buried itself in the rat-man’s neck, killing him outright. The other ratmen twisted round, searching for the source of this murderous attack. More arrows shot through the air, cutting down all but one of the ratmen guarding the prisoners. As the monster closest to Kurt collapsed, the captain snatched a blade from its grasp and flung it across the room, slaying the ratman that still had Belladonna at its mercy.

“I’ve been waiting for reinforcements,” Kurt said, a quiet smile of satisfaction on his face.

A dozen elves stormed into the station from Three Penny Bridge, Tyramin Silvermoon leading them from the front, Otto close behind him. The elves were armed with bows and blades, cutting a swathe through the ratmen. The ratmen were already in shock from the sudden death of their leader. When the elves burst in, it put the ratmen warriors to flight. A handful engaged the new enemy while others beat a hasty retreat, taking the bodies of their slain brethren with them.

Kurt called to his watchmen and they joined the battle, using discarded weapons to catch the remaining ratmen in a pincer movement. The fighting was fast and furious, but the ratmen did not stand their ground for long. A high-pitched squeal cut the air and the ratmen bolted, diving out of windows to evade the elves and battle-weary humans. Half the elves went in pursuit of the enemy, while the others stayed behind, Tyramin among them. Kurt took one last, long look around the station, amazed it was still standing, amazed his tiny force of watchmen had withstood all that had been thrown against them since sunset. Then he collapsed, utterly spent. When Kurt came round, he found Scheusal and Belladonna talking with Otto. The elves were all gone except for Tyramin, who was kneeling by the captain’s side. “Thank you,” Kurt said. “I’m not sure what we’ve done to deserve your intervention or your assistance, but thank you.”

The elf smiled. “We came at the priest’s request. The House of Silvermoon was in his debt, due to the kindness he showed my dead brother. Besides, I understand it was these vermin who killed Arullen.”

“I believe so,” Kurt replied, sitting up with some difficulty. His head was spinning and his body felt more tired than it had ever been

before. He reached into the pocket of his tunic and removed the brooch found near Arullen's body. The tiny shard of warp-stone was back inside its setting, as before. He had lied to the ratmen, determined to delay them as long as possible. The moment the ratmen had the heart stone, the lives of all those within the station would have been forfeit. More importantly, it would have enabled the ratmen to reactivate their greatest weapon.

Kurt had no idea what that weapon might be, but he knew its most likely target: Marienburg. If the city ever fell to the ratmen, that would trigger a chain reaction that could destroy the Empire. The sacrifice of a few lives in a Suiddock watch station was nothing in such circumstances, but he was grateful to have survived his encounter with the ratmen. The captain explained all of this to Tyramin as he handed over the brooch. "I believe your brother died getting this artefact away from the ratmen. I ask that you take it back to your enclave, and ensure it never leaves the protection of the House of Silvermoon. Will you do that, Tyramin, brother of Arullen?"

"I do it willingly," Tyramin replied, bowing his head to Kurt before helping the captain back on his feet. Together the two unlikely allies surveyed the damage to the station. "You and your men fought well. Few can hold back a ratmen attack for long, and fewer still have the strength of will to stare into the face of death while refusing to surrender their dignity. A pity none will ever know of this courage."

Kurt nodded. "The ratmen removed all trace of themselves and I'll forbid my men from speaking of what happened here, for their own sakes. Besides, I doubt anyone would believe a word of it."

"I bid you farewell," Tyramin said. "I will make mention of your courage to my elders. It is good to know there are creatures of valour and resolve among the men of Marienburg."

Kurt bowed, accepting the compliment. When he looked up again the elf had gone. Also missing was Henschmann. Belladonna said the crime boss had fled once the ratmen were vanquished. "Couldn't wait to get back to his lair," she smirked, before her expression softened. "Thank you for saving me."

"The station has lost too many Black Caps," Kurt replied. "Jan, Verletzung, Mutig, Faulheit, Raufbold and Narbig-I didn't want to lose anymore." He ran a hand across the lumps and bumps on his skull, wincing in pain at the many places where the ratmen had hit him. "What happened to Cobbius?"

"Come and see," Scheusal interjected. "It isn't pretty." Tyramin studied the brooch on his way back to Sith Rionnasc'namishathir. It was not made by the hand of elves, though he could understand why Schnell and the others had believed that. The intricate design of the brooch had much in common with the work of elf silversmiths, but it

was born of another race, one far older than the memories of mortal men. As Tyramin held the brooch in his hands, he felt the warpstone shard set within the design calling to him, asking to be found, to be set free.

This tiny piece of evil had lured Arullen and his friends to their doom in the catacombs. But for Arullen's bravery and the fortitude of Schnell, the ratmen would have the brooch now. Tyramin shuddered at how close Marienburg had been to disaster these past few days. The city owed the Black Caps of Three Penny Bridge an enormous debt, though none but him knew that. But true heroism needed no celebration to be truly heroic. The high tide was receding from the basement, leaving a floor awash with shattered armour and broken weapons. Cobbius was still hanging from his shackles, but little remained of him from the neck down except a skeleton. The ratmen had stripped every morsel of flesh from his bones. "I see they had the good taste to leave his head untouched," Kurt observed. "Best put his remains in a bag and throw it into the water at Doodkanaal. I don't think his cousin Lea-Jan will want anyone else seeing what's left of Abram."

Otto was still waiting for the captain when Kurt made his way back upstairs. "I'm sorry I couldn't get here sooner, but the elves took some persuading," the priest explained. He glanced at the multitude of bodies littering the station floor, while yet more were piled up outside on Three Penny Bridge. "I can see I'm going to be busy over the next few days. Will business always be this good while you're around?"

"Let's hope not," Kurt sighed. "I want you to hold a service for all the watchmen who fell defending this place-Jan, especially. They deserve more than a burial barge."

The priest bowed. "It would be an honour."

Kurt called Bescheiden over. "Willy, I need you to help Otto recover Sergeant Woxholt's body from the tunnel in the basement. Can you do that?"

The grief-stricken watchman nodded. "It's… It's the least I can do for him."

"Good man," the captain replied, placing a comforting hand on Bescheiden's shoulder. Henschmann cancelled his appointments for the day, telling Helga he was not to be disturbed under any circumstances. Even Madame von Tiezer was to be turned away. Once satisfied Helga understood his mood, Henschmann went into his office and stood by a window, staring out at Riddra and Three Penny Bridge in the distance. He remained there for hours, refusing all attempts by his bodyguard to bring him food or drink. Henschmann was still standing by the windows when Kurt approached the Marienburg Gentleman's Club, not long after midday. "Helga!"

“Yes, sir?” she replied, hurrying into his office.

“Captain Schnell is coming to see me. He is to be admitted without question or hindrance.”

The bodyguard frowned, but knew better than to question her orders. “Yes, sir, of course,” she said, withdrawing. Helga returned a few minutes later, ushering the watch captain inside. Henschmann waited until she had gone, closing the door after her, before speaking.

“Quite a busy night,” he said, remaining by the window.

“I’ve had worse,” Kurt replied, before pausing. “No, perhaps not.”

“I should hope not.” The two men stood in silence a while, deep in thought.

“I came to inform you Abram Cobbius is dead. The ratmen consumed him.”

“No loss,” Henschmann said. “He was an ambitious fool who outreached himself. Seeking his release was a matter of principle, nothing more.”

“And trying to drive the Watch out of Suiddock?” Kurt asked. “Was that also about principles?”

“I’ve decided to let you have your little outpost of justice, if you wish to stay in that district.”

“How magnanimous of you, Casanova.”

“There is little you can actively do to hurt me,” Henschmann continued, ignoring the insult. “My business interests stretch far further than Riddra, or even Suiddock as a whole. And my influence goes even further. It would take much more than your meagre resources to undo all of that. I am not bragging, you understand- merely stating a fact.”

Kurt shrugged, not committing himself to agree.

“Besides,” Henschmann added, “you seem to act as a lightning rod for trouble round here. I suspect you’re more useful to me where you are on Three Penny Bridge. Consider that a compliment, if you wish. I will have a word with your commander, see if he can’t arrange for you to have some reinforcements. Not much point having a watch station on the bridge if you’ve nobody left to man it, is there?” Kurt made his way back to the battered and broken station as the sun began its slow descent toward the horizon once more. Somehow he and a few of his recruits had survived everything the city could throw against them and more. They had lost far too many of their colleagues along the way, but the worst was over now. At least, he hoped it was. But rebuilding the station would be a massive task and one his recruits were ill equipped to undertake. Kurt shook his head. Maybe it would be easier to go back to the commander, tail between his legs, and admit defeat. For once the Schnell family pride would have to come second, in the service of a greater good.

The captain was still mulling over his options as he got within sight of Three Penny Bridge. The span was choked with people, all of them gathered outside the station. Kurt quickened his pace, eager to see what was wrong now. But the closer he got, the denser the crowd became. As he struggled through the throng, people started to clap him on the back and applaud him. It was a disconcerting sensation after being the target of so much hatred and derision since arriving in Suiddock. When he did reach the front of the station, Kurt was stunned to see gangs of citizens hard at work rebuilding the battered walls, doors and windows. Scheusal was directing the efforts, while Molly and her girls were fetching drinks and equipment for the workers. Terfel leaned out of the captain's office window and gave him a cheerful wave.

Belladonna came out to see why the citizens were cheering and clapping. She smiled as Kurt approached, calling to him. "Isn't it incredible? They heard about how we stood our ground against Henschmann and his mercenaries! I think you've won them over, captain!"

Kurt shook his head, still not quite able to believe what he was seeing. Maybe some good had come out of all the sacrifices, all the pain, all the suffering and all the deaths. Maybe. Time would tell. Deep beneath the station, in the tall columns of stone that supported Three Penny Bridge, one particular stone pulsed hungrily. It had tasted blood five days earlier and it had feasted again when the ratmen brought it chunks of raw flesh torn from the bones of Abram Cobbius. The stone called out into the darkness, summoning other monstrous creatures, calling the denizens of darkness to it. A sickly, green glow emanated from it, pulsating with evil. The stone had tasted human blood and it wanted more…